

Two Girls and a Mystery



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Just For Fun

Sept. 30, 1932

2







"A FORTUNE HIDDEN HERE!" SHE THOUGHT.

"Two Girls and a Mystery."

Page 71

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Two Girls and a Mystery

OR

The Old House in the Glen

BY

MAY HOLLIS BARTON

AUTHOR OF "THREE GIRL CHUMS AT LAUREL HALL,"
"NELL GRAYSON'S RANCHING DAYS," ETC.

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Or the Old House in the Glen

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TWO GIRLS AND A MYSTERY

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TWO GIRLS AND A MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

ALL ABOUT MONEY

BARBARA WINTERS had been reading in the alcoved window-seat, half hidden from the rest of the cozy living room. It was really an exciting book, borrowed from one of the girls at school. But, alas, Barbara had fallen asleep just in the most exciting part of it.

She was roused, how much later she could not tell, by the sound of familiar voices.

Drowsily, half asleep, she listened for a moment before realizing that the conversation was not intended for her ears. Then it was impossible to escape without betraying the fact that she had overheard. Still half drugged with sleep, Bab lay still.

That was where her misery began!

Grandmother and grandfather were talking. Bab had lost her mother and father at a time when she was too young even to remember them.

Since then, Grandmother and "Gran" had filled that tragically empty place in the little girl's life. How well they had filled it and how happy they had made her, only Bab knew.

Her eyes widened with horror as she listened.

They, Gran and her grandmother, were talking of money. They had not, it appeared, enough to make ends meet. Gran's voice sounded dreadful when he said that—so old and weary and terribly discouraged. Tears were in Bab's eyes as she fought with a desire to fling her arms about him.

The war was in some way responsible for this change in the old gentleman's fortunes. Bab gathered that they might even—unbelievable calamity!—be forced to give up their pretty home.

"We must keep this from Bab at all costs," finished Gran. Bab knew, without seeing him, that he was polishing his glasses, a thing he always did when upset about anything or uneasy in his mind. "So gay and light-hearted. We must keep her so."

"Yes." Dear grandmother's voice was soft and anxious. "This shadow must not touch her. She is only a child."

After that Bab would not, for the world, let them know that she had overheard. She lay very, very still until they went into the dining

room. Then a swift rush across the room and upstairs to her own room where she might ponder, undisturbed, this dreadful thing she had heard.

Was it only an hour before that she had been so gay and care-free? Then there had not been a heavier worry on her mind than as to how she would spend the summer vacation!

Gran's tired voice; grandmother's unfailing thought of her!

Something hard and painful rose and rose in Bab's throat until she was forced to bury her face in the pillow on her bed and stifle her sobs in it.

"It isn't fair—they're so old! I must find some way to help them!"

After a long time she went to bed and fell into a restless sleep. She dreamed all night of houses that got up and ran away, foundations and all, when they saw her coming.

It was not at all a pleasant experience, and Bab was glad when the sun climbed over the horizon and drove all the houses back into the mists of unreality where they belonged.

It was a wonderful morning, clear and cool, with the dew sparkling frostily on the grass. The flowers in the old-fashioned garden back of the house smiled their sweetest, but Bab was in no mood to appreciate them.

"I'd rather it would rain," she thought whim-

sically. "Then I'd have a better excuse for moping."

Ten o'clock found her sitting listlessly in the porch swing wondering what she could do.

One thing was certain, she *must* make some money.

"I must, must, must!" she cried, vehemently pounding her clenched fist into a cushion. "I must—but how?"

Her glance instinctively sought the house next door—the big white house with the beautiful grounds and gardens.

"I'd like to tell Gordon about it," she thought wistfully. "But I couldn't do that, of course. Gran wouldn't want me to tell any one."

Gordon Seymour was the boy who lived in the big white house. He and Bab had been playmates since Bab was six and Gordon eight.

The Seymours were rich. Gordon's father had not only made a substantial success in his practice of law, but he had inherited a considerable fortune as well.

The shining windows of the big white house seemed to look with a patronizing air upon the modest cottage of the Winters. The Seymour gardens had been the fair-haired little Bab's playground; Gordon Seymour, her playmate. She thought, with increasing wistfulness, that it would be nice to tell Gordon her troubles.

As though just thinking of the lad had conjured him out of the air, Gordon appeared at that moment, coming through the garden. He vaulted lightly over the railing of the porch and grinned at Bab.

"Hello!" he said. "Why the awful gloom?"

"Gordon is still brown, but he is no longer little," mused Bab, eying him soberly. "He's in his seventeenth year and tall for his age."

Gordon Seymour had deep blue eyes that looked as though they were laughing even when the rest of his face was sober. His hair was fair and thick and burned to an odd, sandy color by constant exposure to the sun. He had a set of fine even teeth that looked almost startlingly white in contrast to the brown of his skin.

Not at all bad looking, as Bab herself sometimes admitted and as any one else in Scarsdale would have said without an instant's hesitation.

Yet now Bab frowned at him.

"I'm not gloomy," she said finally, and sighed to prove it. "I—I'm just trying to think!"

Gordon looked alarmed.

"You don't do it often, do you?" he asked.

"It's a bad habit, Bab. Honest, it is!"

Bab frowned again, though a dimple appeared at the corner of her mouth.

"If all you can do is insult me, you'd better run along, Gordon Seymour," she said, adding, with

apparent innocence: "You *were* going somewhere, weren't you?"

Gordon laughed and got to his feet.

"There's one thing I don't need—and that's a kick!" he said. "I'm off to the post-office now. Want to come along, Bab?"

"I don't expect any letters," returned Bab pensively. "No, you run on, Don. I may be along later."

After a while she did go for a walk, but it was not to the post-office. And because she had hoped to escape possible visitors at the house and be alone for a little time with her own confused, unhappy thoughts, she must, it seemed, encounter Gerry at the very beginning of her walk!

Of course, Gerry was her best girl friend, but even best friends can be in the way sometimes.

Gerry's full name was Geraldine Thompson. She was small and dark, with the face of a gypsy and a gypsy's adventurous spirit. And Gerry adored Bab Winters.

Wending their way homeward after a long jaunt about town, Gerry suddenly put a hand upon Bab's arm and chuckled.

"There's Charlie Seymour," she cried. "He has a new car! Three guesses—what is it?"

Charlie Seymour was Gordon's cousin, but that accidental relationship was the only bond between the two lads. Charlie was thin and tall and dark-

haired. His two years' seniority gave him a certain air of condescension toward his cousin that Gordon sometimes found amusing, sometimes quite the opposite. Charlie was not popular with the young people of Scarsdale, though conceit prevented his realizing that fact.

At present his hobby was racing cars, and one of this species was now parked before the Winters' house with Charlie himself lounging behind the wheel.

Gerry called out impishly:

"What is it, Charlie? Or haven't you named it yet?"

Charlie laughed.

"Not yet," he said. "Thought I'd leave that to you girls."

"To us?" Bab's mirth bubbled up. "I'm sure we could never think of anything to do it justice, Charlie."

Charlie was offended.

"Well, if all you can do is to laugh——," he said, and reached for the gear shift.

Bab relented.

"Don't be mad," she wheedled. "It certainly is a fine car, built for speed and—and everything. Don't you think so, Gordon?" she added, as the latter came hurrying up to them.

Gordon grunted something unintelligible—and probably uncomplimentary—in response.

But Charlie suddenly recovered his good nature.

"Speed? I should say yes!" he chortled. "Jump in, girls, and I'll give you a sample."

"We can die but once," murmured Gerry, and climbed into the tonneau.

Bab followed and, after a moment of hesitation, Gordon slipped into the seat beside his cousin.

Charlie released the clutch and the car jumped forward.

Bab and Gerry gripped the seat as the racer, cutout wide open, roared up the street.

"Just like Charlie to make all the noise he can," gasped Gerry.

It was certainly a fact that people turned to look curiously after the weird contraption as it tore down the street. This appeared to please Charlie. He even stepped on the accelerator a little harder.

Gordon fidgeted and fumed, but Charlie turned a deaf ear to his protests.

They sped along past the outposts of the town and finally swung into the state road. There was little traffic at this time of day, and so Charlie Seymour thought it a fine chance to show the girls and Gordon what his new toy could do in the way of speed.

For a while it was exhilarating. A powerful motor dwelt within the incongruous body of the little car, and it purred along easily, rhythmically, at fifty miles an hour, fairly eating up the road as it sped along.

On, on, while the speedometer crept up—fifty, fifty-two, fifty-five——

"Better take it easy!" shouted Gordon, above the roar of the exhaust. "Sharp turn ahead, ditch on both sides!"

Charlie's narrowed eyes were fixed steadily on the road. He did not glance at Gordon when he spoke—evidently had not, or wanted to pretend he had not, heard him.

"Slow up, you idiot!" roared Gordon. "Do you want to murder us all?"

"Slow up, I tell you!" he repeated, a moment later. "You can't make that turn——"

Gordon reached over to grasp the wheel but Charlie struck his hand away.

"Keep out of this!" yelled the boy at the wheel. "Who's driving this car, anyway?"

"I wish some one with sense were," muttered Gordon, in reply.

The turn was now fairly upon them. Bab and Gerry, clinging together, watched it with staring eyes.

"Slow down! Slow down!" shrieked Bab.

Charlie did slow down—but not enough.

Around the corner, bearing down upon them with terrific speed, came another car.

"Oh!" moaned Gerry. "We'll be killed! We'll all be killed!"

The car was fairly upon them before they could swerve aside. Wild shouts and screams, the shrieking of brakes——

Bab closed her eyes and waited for the crash.

CHAPTER II

IN THE DITCH

IT was because Bab Winters' eyes were closed that she missed seeing what Gordon did. But Gerry saw it all. Gerry Thompson made it a point never to miss anything!

As the big car bore down upon them, Charlie seemed stricken with a paralysis of fright. He appeared unable to move.

Face set, Gordon reached over and pulled the wheel sharply to the right.

At the same time the driver of the other car—a dark-faced, swarthy fellow—swung on two wheels to his side of the road, skidded along a shallow ditch, teetered madly for a second, then rushed on.

As the car whizzed by, Gerry had a confused vision of a white, terrified face, the face of a girl seated beside the swarthy driver of the other car. The girl had flung out both arms to them as though in a desperate cry for help.

It was over in a moment. The machine flashed by while their own car neared the dangerous curve.

Gordon, white-faced and thin-lipped, gripped the wheel in both his strong, brown hands, guiding the runaway car as best he could from his cramped position, his foot seeking the brake pedal.

Rounding the curve on two wheels, the car skidded wildly across the road. In another moment, unhampered, Gordon would have had it under control.

But Charlie recovered, now that the worst of the danger was past. He sat up violently and grasped the wheel.

Gordon's position put him at a disadvantage. He felt his hands slipping from the wheel. The machine careened crazily from side to side, skidded once too often, and slid off with a jarring bump into the ditch at the side of the road.

As the car settled and leaned against the steep bank as though wearied after its mad adventure, the girls climbed out of the side of the car nearest the road.

Gordon and Charles got out, too. The cousins glared at each other angrily.

"Pretty piece of work you pulled," Charlie began, scowling fiercely as he regarded his car. "Next time maybe you'll keep your hands off and let me manage my own boat. If it hadn't been for you——"

"If it hadn't been for me," broke in Gordon,

"your fool car, to say nothing of us, would probably have been smashed into very small bits."

"Stop quarreling, boys," interrupted Bab peaceably. "We're safe and the car isn't damaged—for which we should be very thankful."

"The question is, how are we going to get back to Scarsdale," said Charlie, still scowling.

"A team of good, stout horses——," suggested Gerry, giggling.

"And here it comes," said Bab, pointing up the road. "A good stout team of horses with a pleasant-looking farmer on the wagon seat behind them. We'll ask him to haul us out."

"He looks as if he had a kind heart," agreed Gerry, with a chuckle.

The farmer, on hearing of their difficulty, promptly agreed to help them. The powerful horses were put to work. A straining of strong shoulders, a snort and a heave, and the car moved slowly from the ditch. A moment later the racer was hauled to the road, uninjured.

"Takes a good team of horses every time," chuckled the good-natured farmer.

He refused Gordon's offer of payment, and climbed to the high seat of his wagon.

"They don't go so fast, mebbe," he added; "but you can always be tol'able sure with horses that you'll git where you're goin', anyway. Good day to you!"

He clucked to his horses. The wagon creaked and started up the road. Then, suddenly, the driver drew rein and glanced back at them where they still stood in the road beside the rescued car. There was a speculative look in his eye.

"You say you met an automobile goin' like blazes just before you skidded into that ditch," he remarked. "Did you happen to notice anything unusual about that automobile?" he added insinuatingly.

"I did!" returned Gerry quickly. "There was a dark-skinned man driving. I remember thinking, even in that awful moment, what a villainous looking face he had. And there was a girl in the car——"

The farmer nodded. He seemed excited.

"And what idee did you git concernin' that girl?" he asked Gerry.

"Why—I'm not sure, it all happened so suddenly," Gerry frowned in an effort to concentrate while the boys and Bab watched her with growing astonishment. "Only, it seemed to me, she looked awfully scared about something and I thought I heard her call 'Help'!"

"Gerry!" cried Bab. "Why didn't you——"

But Gerry rushed on excitedly.

"I thought—I couldn't be sure—but I thought the man at the wheel put a hand over her mouth

and dragged her back into the car. It was all over in a flash," she added apologetically.

While Bab and the boys stared at her in sheer amazement, the farmer nodded shrewdly.

"Just what I thought. I met that car myself a ways down the road and I said to myself, 'There's somethin' all-fired queer about this thing. That girl beside the dark-skinned critter at the wheel looks like she was bein' took!' "

"Do you mean kidnaped?" asked Bab incredulously.

"Yes'm, that's what I mean! If I'd a gas wagon like that one o' yours, I'd 'a' followed that automobile, certain." With the last word, he clucked to his horses and the wagon creaked off down the road.

The young folks returned to Scarsdale at a very decorous pace, considering that Charlie still drove the car.

Naturally, the chief subject of conversation was the farmer's sensational theory concerning the girl in the automobile. In fact, they had not stopped talking about it when the car finally drew up before the Winters' house.

"You come in to lunch, Gerry," Bab invited. "Grandmother will have it ready."

"All right," said Gerry. "And thanks so much for the ride, Charlie. Who says nothing thrilling ever happens in Scarsdale!"

When Charlie Seymour and his atrocious car had roared off down the street Gordon turned to Bab. He held out toward her a crumpled letter.

"Sorry, Bab," he apologized. "Got this at the post-office, but in the excitement of our feverish ride forgot to give it to you until now."

"Thanks," said Bab absently. She regarded the large envelope with curiosity and a vague excitement. The postmark was New York.

"Open your letter, Babs," urged Gerry, curious, bright eyes upon her chum.

Bab roused herself and thrust the letter rather hurriedly into her pocket.

"We'll read it after lunch," she said. "We'd better go up and help grandmother now and tell her where we've been." She waved to Gordon as he leaped the hedge that separated the Seymour grounds from the Winters' garden.

"Who can be writing to me from New York?" she wondered. And because it occurred to her that there might be something very unusual, maybe even exciting, about the contents of this letter, she wanted to savor to the full a delicious uncertainty before making sure of what it contained.

Gerry's merry chatter made a pleasant meal of what would ordinarily have been a very quiet one. Afterwards the two girls washed the luncheon

dishes with a great noise and clatter, then joined Mrs. Winters on the porch.

As quietly as possible Bab took the letter from her pocket. But Gerry's bright, quick eyes followed the gesture instantly, with a pounce like that of a mischievous kitten.

"Look, Granny!" she called to Mrs. Winters. "Our Bab's got a letter."

"A big letter, Granny," said Bab, meeting the inquiring gaze of the pink-cheeked old lady. "It's from New York, too."

Grandmother laid down her knitting to watch as Bab slit open the envelope. In the porch swing Gerry slid closer to her chum, so that she might look over her shoulder.

As Barbara Winters slowly opened the crackling pages and glanced at the printed heading, she felt her heart begin to pound to a slow rhythm of excitement.

"Grandmother!" she cried. "It—why, it's from a lawyer! What can a lawyer have to say to me?"

CHAPTER III

AN EXTRAORDINARY LEGACY

"PERHAPS the best way, Bab, to find out what the lawyer has to say to you is to read your letter and find out," suggested Gerry Thompson.

But Bab Winters was not listening to her chum. She was already deep in the letter—a letter which comprised several sheets of interesting-looking manuscript.

"It isn't some one suing you, I hope," said Gerry to Bab's averted fair head. "Or a summons to court," pensively. "Or some one dunning you for money. It isn't anything like that, is it, Bab?"

"No." Bab's glance went beyond Gerry to meet her grandmother's steady eyes. "It's—why, Granny dear, I believe it's a will!"

Gerry reached over and made a swift snatch at the papers, at the imminent risk of tearing them to pieces. She read, in a queer, catchy voice:

"'Last Will and Testament of Jeremiah Dare.' Oh, Bab!" she added wildly, "you've gone and been left a million dollars by that somebody with

a funny name. You can have a big house up on the hill and give huge dinner parties——”

“Wait! Wait!” cried Bab.

She took the papers from Gerry and began searching feverishly in the envelope. “There must be a letter with this. Oh, yes—here it is!”

“From the lawyers?” asked Mrs. Winters in a quiet voice.

Bab nodded.

“Listen!” she commanded.

Gerry listened, wide-eyed and intensely thrilled, while Bab read the first legal communication she had ever received.

“Miss Barbara Winters,” it began. “Dear Madam——”

Gerry giggled.

“All grown up of a sudden, aren’t you, Bab?”

“Your uncle, Jeremiah Dare—— Goodness!” ejaculated Bab, and again looked across at Granny. “I’d nearly forgotten there was such a person. Poor old man! Rosa Lee used to frighten me with him when I was a little thing.” Rosa Lee had been Barbara’s nurse during the days of her little girlhood.

Mrs. Winters nodded. Gerry cried impatiently:

“Read on! Read on!”

“Your uncle, Jeremiah Dare, having died and

left you his estate,' " Bab complied, " 'we hereby notify you to that effect.' "

"Oh, Bab, how much?" breathed Gerry. "Is it a million dollars?"

But Bab, skimming over the legal phrasing, extracting the meat from the communication, informed them that it was not a million dollars at all. In fact—the disheartening fact stood starkly revealed—this remarkable inheritance was practically worthless!

"Let me see!" cried Gerry, unwilling to trust to Bab. "You must have overlooked something important, Babs."

But after a few moments of scowling scrutiny, Gerry flung the document from her, as though to intimate that she was through with it forever.

"Then all you get," she cried wrathfully, "is a miserable little five hundred dollars and a miserable, tumble-down shack in the woods. Bab, I'll never get over this!"

In response to a gesture from her grandmother, Bab picked up the document and handed it to her. She watched sadly, a lump in her throat, as Granny adjusted her spectacles upon her nose. If only queer old Uncle Jeremiah had left her a real fortune, something that would have smoothed away all difficulties for her grandparents, making them secure for the rest of their lives! Bab felt

foolish tears of disappointment burn behind her eyelids.

"Oh, well," she said bravely, "five hundred dollars is five hundred dollars and a good deal better than nothing. As for the house, it may not be in bad condition at all."

"You might be able to sell it and get something for it," Gerry admitted. "But what a come-down, and when I had my heart all set on at least a million dollars!"

"I don't know why you should have set your heart on any such thing," said Bab stoutly. "From what I've heard of my queer old Uncle Jeremiah Dare, he was anything but a rich man. Granny!" she added quickly. Her grandmother was nodding and smiling—actually smiling!—over the will. "What do you find that's funny?"

"Something you evidently haven't read at all," replied Mrs. Winters in the same quiet voice. "And I was laughing because the whole thing seems so entirely like Jeremiah."

She handed the will back into Bab's eager fingers.

"Did you read the codicil?" she asked.

"Codicil?" repeated Bab vaguely. She had only the haziest idea what a codicil was.

But Mrs. Winters pointed out a short paragraph at the very end of the will.

"Read that," she commanded.

Bab frowned as she read. Then suddenly her eyes brightened, for the codicil to this extraordinary will was stranger than the will itself.

She read and reread it, striving to make some sense from the mysterious wording of it, while her eyes grew brighter and the hand that held the paper quivered a little with eagerness.

Gerry had, for some time, been regarding her with lively interest. Now she broke in impatiently.

"What are you laughing to yourself about, Bab Winters?" she inquired. "If there is a joke I think you and Granny are mean to enjoy it between you and leave me out of it. It's positively impolite!"

"I don't know," cried Barbara breathlessly, "but what this whole thing may be a joke on me. Listen while I read this. 'Only to one with courage and a desire for adventure——'"

"That's me!" interrupted Gerry irrepressibly.

"—will the old house yield up its treasure,'" continued Bab. "'It has been my experience that money, unearned, is harmful to the soul.' Now what do you think of that?" She put the paper down and looked at them.

"Think of it!" cried Gerry joyfully. "Why, Bab, it's priceless, immense, glorious! You can see what the old boy means, can't you?"

Her eyes on her grandmother, Bab slowly shook her head.

"I can't see——"

"Why," Gerry rushed on, "your Uncle What's-his-name has buried a treasure or something in that old house and the codicil thing is just a bid for you to come on and dig it up—the treasure, I mean—not the codicil!"

"If that's really what he meant, then I must say he had a sense of humor," said Bab dubiously.

"No!" It was Mrs. Winters who spoke, and her quiet, sweetly modulated voice won instant attention from the girls. "Your Uncle Jeremiah Dare was the last one in the world, Bab, that I would connect with a genuine sense of humor. A queer, lonely old man, eccentric, notional. This leaving his property to you is just one more queer act in a life of queer actions. Your mother had occasion to be good to him once—perhaps that is why he thought of you at the end."

"But this—this codicil thing!" cried Bab, fairly stammering in her eagerness. "What do you think of that, Granny? Doesn't it look rather—mysterious?"

"Yes, it is odd, of course." Mrs. Winters adjusted her spectacles and read the codicil again. "But then, as I said before, Jeremiah always was queer. He traveled a great deal in his earlier days. Later on he settled down in that old house

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in the country and lived, so people said, almost the life of a hermit."

"Was he a miser?" asked Gerry intensely.

Mrs. Winters looked at the girl and smiled indulgently.

"I shouldn't wonder if he were, my dear," she said.

"Then," said Gerry triumphantly, "that settles it!"

"Settles what?" asked Bab.

"The question, of course," retorted her chum. "If your Uncle What's-his-name was really a miser, Bab, then he kept all his money right in the house with him. Misers always do."

"Then I suppose he buried his money and left it for me to find—provided I'm smart enough!" added Bab. "But it sounds so silly. Why should he go to all the trouble of hiding the money—if there is any—when it would have been ever so much easier just to leave it in the bank with the other five hundred?"

"Why, don't you see?" cried Gerry, with an excited giggle. "The codicil explains everything. Doesn't it say, 'Money, unearned, is harmful to the soul'?"

"I wonder!" cried Bab softly.

CHAPTER IV

THE LUCKY RING

AFTER the two girls and Mrs. Winters had discussed and rediscussed Bab's legacy until they had viewed it from every possible angle, Bab began to think in more practical terms.

"The lawyer says that he will 'wait upon' me in a day or two," said the girl, dimpling at the idea of Barbara Winters being "waited upon." "After that I suppose I'll be perfectly free to visit the ancestral mansion, sha'n't I, Granny?"

The old lady nodded, smiling.

"Naturally you will want to look over your property, dear. Though I wouldn't expect too much," she warned. "From all I have heard, your uncle's house was in a deplorable condition. He would never spend a cent for repairs."

"She doesn't really care about the house," explained Gerry, sparkling. "All she wants is to be supplied with a pick and shovel. Then, on with the treasure hunt!"

"Of course, I sha'n't want to go all alone," said Bab pensively, not looking at Gerry. "I'll posi-

tively have to have company on such a perilous adventure."

"Some people have said that I'm the very best company in the world," returned Gerry.

Bab giggled.

"Would you really like to come, Gerry?" she asked.

Gerry snorted.

"Just try to keep me out of this party!" she said.

Of course Mrs. Winters decided that the girls must have adult companionship upon their very interesting adventure. After considerable thought on the subject Bab and Gerry decided to ask Rosa Lee, Barbara's old colored nurse, to go along.

Mrs. Winters demurred.

"I don't think Rosa Lee is exactly the proper chaperon," she said.

"Oh, but, Granny, she's such a wonderful cook!"

"Take her, by all means," laughed Mrs. Winters. "But ask some one else to go along, too."

This was a hard problem and one that required much consultation and earnest thought. The girls finally gave it up for that day, and abandoned themselves to a glorious period of anticipation.

The next day the lawyer came.

Gerry Thompson happened to be on hand for one of the most interesting conferences in which either she or Barbara Winters had ever participated.

It was shortly after breakfast. In fact, Mr. Winters had not yet finished his breakfast. But as Gerry was in the habit of turning up at odd moments almost any time of the day or night, Bab's family saw nothing odd in that young lady's joining them at such an hour. Mr. Winters even urged her to take some bacon and eggs with him.

As a matter of fact, there was a great bond of sympathy between the old gentleman and the jolly young girl, and Gerry Thompson petted and cajoled him as much as she did her own father, to the great delight of Mrs. Winters and Bab.

This morning Mr. Winters seemed in better spirits than usual. He was enormously excited about Bab's legacy. Though Jeremiah Dare was no relation of his, he had heard him referred to occasionally by his wife. In his secret thoughts he had surrounded the eccentric old fellow with a sort of glamour as a miser, who, in the course of his bartering in various old world ports, had perhaps found the opportunity of hoarding a considerable fortune.

Of this considerable fortune then, reasoning as Mr. Winters reasoned, his pretty, golden-haired

Barbara was sole heir. The five hundred dollars left to his granddaughter seemed to the old gentleman a godsend; an open sesame as it were, to the treasure he had firmly settled in his own mind must be hidden somewhere in the old house in the country.

Although the years had piled themselves relentlessly upon the broad shoulders of Caleb Winters, he remained youthfully enthusiastic at heart; a man whose spirit, despite care and nagging worries, would never age.

Now, as he helped Bab and Gerry from the platter of eggs for the second time, he spoke of Bab's legacy in glowing terms.

"You really think we ought to go up to the old house right away!" cried Bab eagerly. Mrs. Winters smiled indulgently upon the three children, grown-up one included. "Oh, Gran, do you really think there is a fortune hidden about that old house?"

"Why not?" cried the old gentleman. "If I were in your shoes, youngster, I'd not let another blade of grass grow under my feet before I made an attempt, at least, to find out the truth. It's the kind of mystery and adventure not many youngsters get a chance at, nor oldsters, either," he added, with a wistful gleam in his eye. "Egad, what would I give, I wonder, to be able to shrug forty-odd years from my shoulders."

"Dear Gran!" Bab was beside him, her arms about his neck and her soft cheek pressed against his bristling one. "Listen to me, please! Whatever I find up in that old house—if I find anything—is yours, yours and grandmother's. Do you hear me?"

"Gracious, there's the bell!" cried Mrs. Winters as a peremptory summons tinkled through the house. "Who can our caller be, I wonder, so early in the day?"

She hurried from the room and the others heard her in a low-toned conversation with some one at the door. When she returned her face was as red as though she had just finished the day's baking.

"It's a lawyer," she said in a whisper, "and he wants to see Bab."

Bab jumped to her feet.

"A lawyer!" she repeated, feeling flustered. "Are you sure he wants to see me?"

"Quite sure. Run along, dear."

"If you need any help, Bab, lean on me!" Gerry offered her arm and Bab giggled nervously.

"You come with me, Granddaddy," she begged. "I feel the need of moral support."

Her grandfather chuckled.

"Come on, then," he said. "I dare say the fellow won't bite."

However, upon seeing the stranger, Bab was

not so sure of that. He looked as though he might be tempted to bite upon the slightest provocation.

He was short and thin and wiry, was this lawyer, Mr. James. He had a head that was too large for his body and he was exceedingly bald. His eyes were small and beady, his nose large and his mouth the most thin-lipped Bab had ever seen.

He was seated on the extreme edge of one of the worn but comfortable chairs and he looked up with so sharp an expression on Bab's entrance that the girl feared he was prepared to bite at once!

Mr. Winters spoke in his usual cordial tones.

"Ah, Mr. James?" he said. "Glad to know you, sir. I presume you have come to talk business with my young granddaughter here, who, I understand, is heir to her great-uncle's property."

"And little enough it is," said Samuel James uncompromisingly.

His tone was dry and musty as, indeed, was his whole appearance. Bab Winters had the impression that he had spent his life poking into law books and other people's business. She disliked him at once with an intensity that was not characteristic of her.

"But, such as it is," Mr. Winters continued, with disarming geniality, "I suppose your purpose

in coming here is to turn it over to its rightful owner."

"Just so," retorted Mr. James dryly. "I have here"—he reached for a portfolio which he had dropped at the side of his chair—"papers left by my client, now deceased, including the deed to his house. Here also are the keys to the house and a check for five hundred dollars on my late client's bank. I had strict orders before the death of Mr. Dare to deliver these things in person and, by so doing, discharge my last duty to him."

Bab willingly surrendered the papers to her grandfather, who fell to examining them carefully, while she herself reached for the keys—keys to the first property she had ever owned.

Bab thrilled. What might not these little bits of rusty iron disclose to her? What mysteries had they locked the door upon, perhaps mysteries to be revealed only by her own exploring hand? What was the fortune that awaited her behind locked doors?

Besides the keys there was a finger ring—a ring of dull gold, broad and flat, like a signet ring. But, instead of a monogram, there was engraved on the back the image of a tiny, smiling Buddha with jeweled eyes, green, emerald eyes that gleamed in the sunlight.

"What is this?" she asked.

"It is a ring of considerable value and antiq-

uity," said the dry voice of the lawyer. "It is supposed, by those superstitious enough to believe it, to bring luck to its wearer. It was your uncle's wish, Miss Barbara, that you wear the lucky ring day and night."

"How queer!" exclaimed Bab, vaguely excited. "I'm not a bit superstitious, but of course I'll wear it. It is really very beautiful."

CHAPTER V

LIGHTS AND NOISES

WHILE Barbara Winters turned the lucky ring over and over in her hand she was uncomfortably conscious that the eyes of Samuel James were upon her in an intent, speculative look.

After a moment she raised her own candid gray eyes to his, a little troubled and questioning.

"You—have you something to say to me?" she asked.

"I have debated whether what I have to say had better not be left unsaid," the lawyer replied.

His tone was so grave that even Grandfather Winters looked up inquiringly.

Bab felt a chill of apprehension strike across her elation.

"What is it?" she cried. "Is anything wrong? Didn't Uncle Jeremiah leave the house to me, after all?"

"He left it to you. There can be no doubt of that," the dry tones of the lawyer responded. "But I feel it my duty to warn you that there have been stories circulated in regard to your

inheritance, Miss Barbara, that are anything but—er—pleasant.”

Mr. Winters was all alert now. Bab could not but think as she looked at him of a small boy on the scent of a promising adventure.

“What do you mean? What sort of happenings?” he asked, before Bab could speak.

Mr. James cleared his throat and rubbed a thin hand over the blue-black stubble that adorned his chin.

“Ahem! Lights!” he said. “And noises within and about the house——”

“Ooh—haunted!”

All three started and turned, to find Gerry Thompson standing in the doorway regarding them with sparkling eyes.

“Sorry, Bab,” she said, meeting the gaze of her chum. “I simply *had* to listen!”

Samuel James, after his first start of surprise, appeared distinctly put out. He looked from Mr. Winters to Barbara and back again indignantly, as though demanding to know the meaning of so unseemly an interruption.

Bab beckoned to her chum, however, and patted the seat beside her.

“This is Geraldine Thompson,” she informed the lawyer, half-apologetically. “She is my best chum and knows all about my inheritance.”

For a moment it appeared that the attorney was about to request Gerry's swift expulsion from the room. However, he swallowed the impulse and replied rather sourly to the questions of the excited girls.

"You said lights had been seen in and about the house," Bab stated. "How do you know this, Mr. James?"

"It is the talk of the countryside," the lawyer returned. "One cannot spend an hour in the village of Clayton and not hear the entire history of the happenings in the old brown house in the glen."

"Bab, each moment adds a thrill," cried Gerry irrepressibly. "You have inherited not only five hundred dollars and a house, but a ghost as well. I'm absolutely thrilled to death!"

Bab gave an excited giggle.

"I imagine more—and worse—thrills are in store for you, then," she retorted. "Wait till we get up there!"

Mr. James started and regarded the two girls closely. Then he turned to Mr. Winters.

"You certainly do not mean," he said incredulously, "that your—er—granddaughter intends to—er—visit her property?"

Mr. Winters, who had been watching the two girls with smiling indulgence, appeared surprised.

"Why not?" he queried. "Surely, it is the nat-

ural thing for an heiress to want to have a look at her inheritance."

"After what I have told you I should have thought you would have changed your mind," observed the attorney. "If you will permit me to say so, I think that that gloomy old house is no place for a young girl——"

"There will be two," corrected Gerry, in an all-but-inaudible murmur.

"But there are unpleasant stories about the place," persisted the lawyer. "Of course, no one believes the story about ghosts. Bah! That is ridiculous——"

"Just so!" murmured Gerry. Bab sent her a warning glance.

"But there is a mystery that I truly believe has its foundation in some sinister fact. That fact, in my estimation, should be discovered and the shadows surrounding the place dispelled before Miss Barbara should be permitted to visit her inheritance."

Mr. James' eloquence appeared suddenly to have exhausted him. He sat back, relapsing once more into his dry and dusty manner.

"However, you must judge these things for yourself," he added. "I must consider my duty discharged when I have warned you of what you may expect."

"I have one or two questions to ask," Mr.

Winters broke in quietly. "Have you yourself seen anything of these—er—curious happenings, lights and so forth, that you have so eloquently described?"

Mr. James fumbled with some papers in his portfolio before replying. The girls held their breath for his answer.

"I have seen with my own eyes," he said slowly, "a light that traveled from one room to another, flickering now and then as though blown upon by a strong wind though at the time no windows were open in the house and there was scarcely a breath of wind outside."

"The ghost!" cried Gerry dramatically. "Why didn't you charge in and seize him?"

"Or her!" said Bab.

"We—I was in the company of the sheriff—searched the place thoroughly," continued Samuel James in a frigid tone that plainly rebuked the frivolous interruption. "The candle flickered out as we approached the house and we saw no sign of any one. The building was apparently deserted.

"Yet," he paused and regarded them intently, while Gerry and Bab slipped closer together on the couch and clasped hands, "all during our search we were conscious of some one or some *thing* following us——"

"Glorious!" cried Gerry, with an ecstatic shudder. "Something that followed you——"

"Keeping always in the darkest corner and just beyond the rays of the lantern we carried," said Mr. James, his voice losing none of its dry and dusty quality as he continued. "At times we were sure that, by merely reaching out a hand, we could touch it, but never once did we feel anything but empty air between our fingers!"

He paused and the girls leaned toward him, their eyes intent upon his face.

Mr. Winters' expression was interested, though half incredulous. It seemed to say that he was not ready to believe all he heard.

"Sometimes the sound was above our heads. Sometimes we thought we heard tiny feet pattering along the hall behind us," continued Mr. James. "But never did the light from our lantern fall upon anything, either human or animal, that might have caused the sounds we heard.

"We were glad, I assure you, cold-blooded, unemotional men that we were, when the door closed behind us and upon that mysterious presence in the house."

"You say you saw lights before entering the house," said Bab slowly. "Do you connect these lights with the queer sounds you heard?"

"My dear young lady, I do not presume to connect anything with anything regarding that

dreary old house in the glen. I have given you the facts honestly, as I believe it my duty to do. It remains for you and your guardians," with a fugitive glance at Mr. Winters, "to decide whether these facts are worthy of your consideration."

After the door had closed behind Mr. Samuel James a few minutes later, Bab and Gerry watched him from the window as he ambled down the walk, hat set primly on his bald head.

"Old kill-joy!" said Gerry resentfully. "Why does he have to come here with his foolish stories about ghosts and mysterious lights and try to spoil the party?"

"Well, he can't! Look; here are the keys!" Bab jingled them challengingly. "And here is the lucky ring!" She held it up so that all might see. "Oh, Gran dear, say that we may go at once!"

She flung both arms about her grandfather's neck and pressed her cheek to his.

"I want to try the keys. I want to pry into that mysterious old house, and, if there is a fortune, I want to find it. Say we may go in a day or two! Promise, Gran!"

Bab knew from long experience that her grandfather could refuse her nothing when she asked in that fashion. He did not refuse her now.

"I don't see why not, little girl," he said, twin-

ing a lock of fair hair about one big finger. "After all, the house is yours."

Grandmother did not yield so easily to the cajolery and wheedling of the two girls. The old brown house in the glen was in a lonely situation, and it was hard to imagine on what facts the disquieting rumors concerning the mysterious lights and patterings were based. However, in the end she, too, gave in, saying:

"I suppose I have outlived my adventurous days and am over-cautious, and it would be asking you to give up something that does not often come in a young girl's way. So go, Bab dear, if you want to."

Wild with excitement and delight, Gerry grabbed Bab around the waist and waltzed her about the room and out into the hall.

CHAPTER VI

GERRY'S NEWS

It was some time later the same day—about two o'clock, to be exact.

A group of excited young folks, friends of Gerry and Bab and Gordon, were lounging on the lawn outside the tennis court on the Seymour place. It was a very hot day and, while some of the young folks had resolutely started to play tennis, they gave up after a set or two, finding it much more agreeable to discuss Bab Winters and her startling letter from New York.

Meanwhile Bab, the center of attraction, had slipped away with Gordon.

"You've answered so many questions your voice is hoarse," said the boy, as he lured her away. "Come over near the fountain and cool off."

"Look here, Bab," he added, when they had put a sufficient distance between them and the "crowd," "I think it's corking—all this happening to you——"

"Gordon," Bab interrupted eagerly, "what do *you* think of Uncle Jeremiah's will?"

Gordon chuckled.

"I think the old boy had a wonderful sense of humor," he said. "I'd like to have known him while he was still in the land of the living."

The youth dropped to the seat beside her, looking very handsome and eager, with one lock of his sunburnt hair falling over his forehead.

"You say the old fellow had some reason for leaving the legacy to you instead of to your grandmother?"

"Great-uncle Jeremiah's favorite sister was named Barbara," Bab explained. "In fact, I think I was named for her. They say she was very beautiful and the only thing poor crusty Uncle Jeremiah ever loved.

"She died when she was only twenty, of consumption, I think, and Grandmother says poor Uncle Jerry was never the same afterward. So I suppose I owe all this good luck to the fact that my name happens to be Barbara," she finished.

"Why question the fates?" demanded Gordon gayly. "At any rate, you are set down in the midst of a mystery that promises to be chock full of thrills and adventures. I don't mind telling you," he added, resentfully whacking the bushes with his racket, "that I'm jealous!"

"Jealous!" repeated Bab, dimpling. "What of?"

"You, of course," said the boy, in an injured tone. "How do you suppose it makes a fellow

feel to be left behind to twiddle his thumbs while adventure like that looms in the offing——”

“As it were,” teased Bab.

“I fear you don’t realize how real my trouble is,” Gordon insisted. “I tell you, it’s downright tragedy.”

Bab Winters was thoughtful for a moment. Then she chuckled.

“If it hurts you so to stay behind, Gordon,” she said, “why do you?”

Gordon met her mischievous eyes for a moment; then slowly and joyfully grinned.

“Do you mean that as an invitation?” he demanded.

Before Bab could reply there was the sound of running feet on the path behind them and a voice penetrated through the shrubbery—Gerry Thompson’s voice.

“Bab, Bab! Where are you? I’ve got news for you.”

As Bab jumped to her feet, Gordon caught her arm eagerly.

“Did you mean it?” he asked. “Will you really let me tag along?”

Bab had just time to nod her head before Gerry burst into view.

“Oh, I beg a million pardons! If I intrude——”

“Don’t be silly,” retorted Bab shortly.

"What's this wonderful news you've been shouting about?"

"Oh, yes, the news!" returned Gerry. She sank down on the stone bench and tried to fan herself with an inadequate handkerchief. "Charlie brought it—the news, I mean. About that kidnaped girl—the one we saw, or thought we saw, the day Charlie tried to kill us in that new atrocity of his——"

"But was the girl actually being kidnaped?" interrupted Bab, and added in the same breath: "How do you know?"

"It's in all the papers," Gerry returned excitedly. "The parents are offering a big reward—a thousand dollars I think Charlie said—for her return or for the capture of the villain that kidnaped her. Makes it interesting, don't you think?"

"It might, if we had any chance of catching the kidnaper," Bab admitted. "That poor girl! What an awful thing to happen to any one!"

"It is," admitted Gerry. "But you haven't heard the strangest part yet, Bab. Charlie showed me the girl's picture in the paper and she looks a lot like you. That isn't all," as Bab started to interrupt. "Her name is like yours, too. The first name is the same—Barbara—and the last is Winthrop."

"Barbara Winthrop," repeated Bab, wonder-

ing. "It does sound something the same. But, really, Gerry, I can't see——"

"Of course you can't. Neither can anybody else. But really, Bab," she added, lowering her voice and speaking quickly as an increasing tumult from the direction of the tennis court heralded the approach of the crowd, "don't you think it's odd—a girl stolen from Scarsdale who looks like you and has a name that is almost the same as yours and just at this time, too?"

"What do you mean—just at this time?" queried Bab, impressed in spite of herself.

"Just at the time you receive your mysterious inheritance, of course. Two sensational things like that don't often happen at the same time."

Gordon Seymour was inclined to scoff.

"Just coincidence," was his verdict.

"Oh, all right," said Gerry. "Scoff if you will. But now I'll tell you a piece of news, Bab, that you can't laugh at."

"What's that?" asked Bab obligingly.

"Charlie Seymour has invited himself to go with us! Laugh that off, if you can!"

However, when they came to think it over later, the girls did not resent Charlie Seymour's intrusion into the sacred circle as much as they had thought they would. As long as Gordon was included anyway, it would be rather nice to have another boy along.

"If for nothing else than to keep the numbers even," added Gerry. "Besides, if the ghost gets too obstreperous, we may need the boys to handle him!"

It was Gordon who finally suggested the perfect chaperon to take along in addition to Rosa Lee.

"How about Mrs. Fenwick? She's a sort of relation of mine, you know, sixth cousin thrice removed, or something of the sort. Anyway, she must be pretty lonesome, living alone the way she does. Bet she'd be glad to go."

Mrs. Fenwick was a quiet little mouse of a woman with a face that was uninteresting until she smiled, when it lit up in a wonderful manner. She lived all alone in a small cottage on the outskirts of the town, and because she was a little deaf and a little queer she was left considerably to herself.

"I'll be glad to go, my dears," she told the girls, with pathetic eagerness. "I am not deaf, really, except when people mumble their words. If you will learn to speak distinctly, I think we shall get along quite well."

So, to the great satisfaction of all concerned, that important point was settled.

Uncle Jeremiah's lucky ring which Bab wore day and night, in accordance with the old gentleman's instructions, was turned about so many

times on Bab's finger by awed and youthful acquaintances that it was only a wonder both ring and finger were not worn through before the day of departure.

Rosa Lee was prepared—old trunk and slender suitcase packed in readiness for the trip, herself eagerly anticipating this joyful break in the dull routine of her life.

The consent of Gerry Thompson's parents had been won only by the exercise of strenuous cajolery on the part of that young person and Gerry declared herself "quite worn out" when the question was satisfactorily settled.

Gerry had arranged to spend the night before their departure with Bab.

Despite her eager anticipation of the morrow, dinner that night was a trial to Bab Winters. Although Gerry was in hilarious spirits and her grandmother and grandfather joined gallantly in the fun, Bab's watchful eyes discovered a deep underlying depression in the mood of the old people.

If she had not known the tragic secret of their poverty, Bab might have thought that they were only sad at the prospect of parting from her. As it was, she knew that a far deeper trouble gnawed at their hearts and threw a dread blight on these last years of their lives, years that should have been filled with sunshine.

And she could not help them!

Uncle Jeremiah's will? A possible hidden fortune? Perhaps——

Later that night when Gerry was sound asleep—dreaming, no doubt, of chests and boxes crammed with gold—Bab pushed back the covers, went to her door and opened it.

A few steps brought her just outside her grandmother's room.

Ah! She had not been mistaken! There was sobbing within that room, a soft, heartbroken sobbing, a sound so lonely and forlorn in its hopelessness that it forced a sob to Bab's own lips.

Slowly the girl crept back to her own room.

For a long time she stood at her window, looking up at the twinkling stars that swam in a mist of tears before her eyes.

The night was heavenly calm. A balmy, sweet-scented breath of air crept in at the window. It stirred the curtain gently and drew a corner of it across her hand as it rested on the window sill.

There was magic in that breeze, magic in the fragrant breath of it that blew Bab's soft hair about her face. The stars no longer swam as though in a mist. Each star was suddenly a tiny lighted torch—a torch that beckoned her on to what?

Adventure!

All the youth of an ageless world called clamorously to Barbara's youth. At that moment she felt equipped to dare and to conquer, no matter how great the odds might be against her.

"If Uncle Jerry has left me money," she told herself vehemently, "I'll find it if I have to dig my way right through to China!"

CHAPTER VII

GETTING AWAY

THE next day was gorgeous—just such a day as Bab Winters and Gerry Thompson would have chosen for their adventure if they had had any say about it.

Warm and sunny, with a fresh breeze blowing. The scent of roses drifted in at the window and the dazzling gleam of the morning sun roused the two girls from pleasant dreams to joyful reality.

Gerry was first out of bed.

"Up, sluggard!" she cried, sternly gazing at her still sleepy-eyed chum. "You will never catch the ten o'clock train that way. Oh, dear," searching frantically, "where did I put my clothes?"

"They are here on the chair where you left them last night," said Bab, rolling over in bed. "Here, catch!"

Gerry caught the flying raiment and giggled.

"Talk about service!" she cried gayly. "I don't need a lady's maid. I have Bab!"

"You start calling names," Bab threatened absently, "and I may not take you to the country with me after all. Come in!"

The gentle tap on the door was followed by Mrs. Winters in person. Bab thought she looked pale and went over and put her arms about her grandmother with more than usual gentleness.

"I wish you were going gold-digging with us, Granny," she said. "Just think! To-day we start on our treasure hunt! And who knows what lovely news——"

"To say nothing of coffers of gold," murmured Gerry.

"We may have for you when we come back!"

"The wealth of Midas in bank notes and golden coins," added Gerry. "Already my fingers begin to tingle——"

"It's an itching palm you have," suggested Bab, with a laugh.

She squeezed her grandmother's shoulders and, reaching up, placed a kiss on the soft cheek.

"We'll be down in just a minute, Granny," she promised.

When, a few minutes later, they followed the old lady downstairs, Bab and Gerry were surprised to see Gordon and Charlie Seymour on the steps of the front porch.

"Literally camped on our doorstep!" giggled Gerry.

"Have you come to breakfast?" asked Bab.

At this sarcasm the two boys came to the screen door and looked in at her reproachfully.

"Bab, you misjudge us," Gordon assured her gravely. "We have been brought up better."

"Something new to learn every day," said Gerry, as she opened the door. "However, come in, do! Bab may possibly be able to spare you a fried egg."

But the boys had already eaten breakfast. They had, they explained, merely risen with the birds so as to be sure of an early start.

The trunks had been sent the day before to Clayton, to be held there until the arrival of the girls and boys.

"Dad will drive us to the station in his car," Gordon added.

There, in the sunshiny cottage of the Winters, there would have seemed to a casual observer nothing to mar the peace and security of the scene.

But to Bab, watching her grandparents when they did not know themselves observed, a grim specter seemed to hover in the background, throwing a sinister, ugly shadow over the brightness of the scene.

Poverty!

A dreadful thing, putting beyond reach so many of the good things of life, Bab thought—the happy, contented, sure things.

If she could only go to these two dear people

who had never denied a wish of hers, who had brought her up to her fifteenth year in happy ignorance of their own struggle and worries, and tell them that she knew their grim secret and loved them and wanted to help them bear it; that she appreciated all they had done for her and sacrificed for her sake!

Dear Granddaddy, joking and laughing with the young folks and stealing, between times, harried anxious glances at the brave, pale face of his wife! And grandmother, with the roses in her soft cheeks faded by nights of weary, anxious vigil!

If she could do something for them; in some way bring back the blessed peace and security that was so necessary for them at this time in their lives!

Gordon Seymour noticed her mood—as strange as it was depressing in one of Bab's sunny temperament.

"What's the matter, Bab?" he asked in a low tone. "Lost the lucky ring, or something?"

Bab looked at him and tried to smile, but her lips trembled treacherously and her eyes filled with tears. Under cover of Gerry's merry chatter, she pushed back her chair and took refuge on the side porch.

There Gordon found her a moment later, her hands grasping the rail and her face very grave as

she stared out over the riot of bloom in the rose garden.

"If you don't want me," said Gordon awkwardly—for, after all, he was only a boy—"I'll go away, Bab. But if there's anything wrong, I'd like awfully to help, if I can."

"It's mighty good of you, Gordon," said Bab, her face turned from him. "But, you see, there isn't anything you can do—really."

"Tell me about it," wheedled the boy.

"Well, it isn't my secret; and, anyway, you might laugh."

"Cross my heart and hope to die if I would!" cried Gordon and Bab laughed, with tears in her eyes.

"We're in dreadful trouble, Don." It was an old nickname that Bab used only in moments of great friendliness for the boy next door. "And I can't see any way out, except, maybe, just one—and that's Uncle Jeremiah's will."

She spoke softly, more to herself apparently than to Gordon. But a great light broke over the boy.

"Uncle Jeremiah's will," he repeated thoughtfully. "H'm!"

That was it, then! Bab needed money. Probably the old folks were in financial trouble. He laid an eager brown hand over Bab's on the railing.

"Hurray for Uncle Jerry, then!" he cried. "Don't you care, Bab! I've a notion that before this summer's work is done you won't have to worry any more about anything.

"Look there!" he pointed across the hedge to his own house. "Dad is backing the car out of the garage. Time to start on the treasure hunt, Bab!"

His enthusiasm was infectious. Bab flung back her head and turned to him with a smile.

"Here's luck, Don!" she cried.

"Here's luck, Bab," the boy replied. "To Uncle Jerry and his hidden fortune!"

After this toast the two joined hands and rushed into the dining room.

"Hurry up, folks!" cried Bab. "Mr. Seymour is coming in the big car!"

There was a scurry for hats and bags and then they all rushed out to greet Mr. Seymour.

The latter was a handsome man. His ruddy face usually wore a half-smile as though he were good-humoredly laughing at life.

He stepped forward now to greet Mr. and Mrs. Winters, who were to go with the young folks as far as the station.

"You can go on, Dad," said Gordon. "Pick up Mrs. Fenwick and Rosa Lee on the way, will you? We're going to get out my car and travel direct to the station."

"Aye, aye, sir, your commands shall be obeyed," said the elder Seymour, with ironic gesture of hand to cap.

Gordon grinned and waved and disappeared among the mass of shrubbery that bordered the Seymour drive. A few moments later Gordon's long blue car slid backward down the drive, nearly colliding with the distinguished-looking gray chassis belonging to his father.

"Watch your step!" commanded the latter, with a wave of his hand toward his son. At the same moment his foot pressed the accelerator sharply and the car darted down the road.

Gordon followed, nobly resisting the desire to race his father's car. The lad reached the station first, however, since it was necessary for Mr. Seymour to turn off the main road and gather up Mrs. Fenwick and Rosa Lee on the way to the station.

In fact, they were so long delayed that Bab became uneasy.

"Why don't they come?" she thought anxiously.

It was nearly train time. To miss it would be little short of tragedy. And of course they could not stir a step without their chaperon and Rosa Lee, the cook.

"Here comes the train!" cried Gerry.

Bab turned startled eyes up the track.

"They'll be late!" she cried tragically. "Gerry, we've simply got to hold that train until they come!"

"Here they come now!" called Charlie Seymour.

Sure enough, as the train sped toward the station the nose of the gray car shot around the corner. The machine stopped on one side of the platform as the train drew in at the other.

CHAPTER VIII

ROSA LEE

BAB WINTERS broke from the circle of her friends and darted to her grandparents as they stepped from the car.

Mrs. Fenwick followed the two old people. She was dressed very quietly and, as usual, had little to say. She smiled at Bab and asked her to speak a little louder, although the girl had already raised her voice to a shout in order to make herself heard above the snorting and rumbling of the train.

Rosa Lee, seated in state beside Mr. Seymour, descended in regal manner. Her rugged old face lighted with pleasure as she saw Bab Winters.

"Ah declares to goodness, you is purtier than ever, honey," she said fondly. "Bress yo' bright eyes!"

"Grandmother!" cried Bab, her arms about the slender old lady. "Wish us all luck. Maybe my first letter will have real news for you. Who knows!"

Mrs. Winters smiled and gave her a gentle push.

"Hurry, dear. You will miss the train."

Bab flung her arms about her grandfather, was held in a bear's embrace for a moment, then yielded to the insistent pressure of Gordon's hand upon her arm.

"I sent Charlie ahead with Gerry and the luggage," announced the lad. "Come on, Rosa Lee, right this way. Good-by, Dad!"

Mrs. Fenwick took care of herself. But it was no small task to pilot Rosa Lee through the crowd on the station platform and see her safely established on the train. Gordon managed it, however, as Gordon Seymour seemed to manage most things.

Rosa Lee, disposed of in a seat by herself, her numerous and mysterious packages ranged about her, Bab turned her attention to the others.

Gerry and Charlie were leaning from the windows, saying good-by to everybody. The next moment Bab made a great discovery. The train was moving!

A pang of homesickness swept over Bab and she leaned far out of the car to catch a last glimpse of the old people she loved.

There they stood, waving to her. Bab's vision blurred as the train swung about a curve, blotting both them and the station from view.

"If they were only happy!" thought Bab.

From the seat behind, Gerry's voice came gleefully to her.

"We're off, my comrades! The great detectives have struck the trail."

Laughing, Bab leaned over and touched Rosa Lee on the shoulder.

"Are you glad you are going with us, Rosa Lee?" she asked.

"Glad ain't no word fo' it, honey," Rosa Lee assured her. "Dis ole woman feels like she could do a dance o' joy in dis yere car aisle, yassir, she does."

"Go ahead, Rosa Lee," put in Gordon. "Why keep all the joy to yourself?"

The colored woman displayed two rows of white teeth in an indulgent smile. Gordon Seymour was a great favorite of hers, although he had always, even as a very little lad, teased her unmercifully.

"Go 'long with you," she retorted. "What wiv rheumatism an' ole age crampin' up mah joints, Ah ain't in no condition to go highsteppin' up dis yere aisle. No sah! Ah's gwine remain jus' where Ah is!"

Gerry chuckled and craned her neck over Bab's shoulder. Her eyes fell with alert curiosity upon a bundle that occupied the seat beside Rosa Lee. She abruptly deserted Charlie and perched

on the arm of the old woman's seat so as to get a better view.

"What have we here?" she demanded, pointing to a package that seemed larger and lumpier than the rest.

"Bress yo' heart, honey, if Ah didn't suspect you'd ask dat question. Dis yere package," with a prideful hand on the paper covering, "done contain de finest doughnuts dat ebber yo' bright eyes did see."

"Doughnuts!" cried Gerry ecstatically. "You old angel! Look out, I'm going to hug you! What else have you got?"

Having learned the contents of one package, Gerry's curiosity concerning the others was not to be denied. It appeared that Rosa Lee had spent the greater part of her time while awaiting the day of departure in the practice of her art—for to her the baking of pies and cakes was nothing less—and was taking with her enough of the fruits of her labor to last them for several days.

"Ah didn't have no notion what kind of cook stove there is whar we're gwine, honey," she explained to Bab. "So Ah jest perceeded to make good use o' mah time."

"I'll say you did," sighed Gerry contentedly. "Rosa Lee, I see where you are going to be a great, great comfort to us!"

At the next station a man got on the train and

passed through, selling papers. Gordon bought several and handed them around to the crowd.

Bab looked over the news of the first page casually, then turned the sheet. She was suddenly startled by her own face, staring back at her from the printed sheet!

A second glance, however, assured her that this picture was not of her at all. Nor was the name beneath it hers.

"Barbara Winthrop," she read. "Why, that was the name of the kidnaped girl—the one who looked so much like me."

It was all clear to her now. She read the short column beneath the picture with increasing interest.

"Wuxtry! Wuxtry!" said Gerry in her ear. "I see you are reading the latest developments in the kidnaping case, Bab. What do you think about it?"

Bab shook her head.

"I don't know what to think," she confessed. "The girl does look like me. It's all pretty mystifying."

"Five thousand dollars for any one who returns the child to her family," went on Gerry. "I wouldn't mind collecting that myself."

"As if you had a chance!" Bab spoke absently. Her eyes had returned to the pictured face in the paper. How like her own it was! Strange——

"Don't try to make me believe that the kidnaping and your mysterious inheritance happened at the same time for nothing." Gerry was speaking again and in her voice was the dark hint of mysterious things. "There is something behind all this, Bab Winters. You just watch and see!"

Although Bab branded Gerry's theory as "all nonsense," she could not rid herself of an uncomfortable feeling that it might not be as nonsensical as it seemed.

It *was* odd that this girl, the victim of a cruel kidnaping, should so closely resemble herself, both in name and person. Viewed from one angle—Gerry's angle—it certainly did seem more than just coincidence that the time of the kidnaping and the announcement of Uncle Jeremiah's generosity to her should be almost simultaneous.

At this point a thought came into Bab's mind. It was a strange and rather terrible thought. It took her breath away.

Was it possible that there might have been some dreadful mistake? Was she, perhaps, the intended victim of the kidnaper—not Barbara Winthrop?

No sooner had the thought entered her mind than she began to scold herself for having been foolish enough to entertain it.

"I won't look for trouble," she told herself,

turning the lucky ring thoughtfully upon her finger. "Uncle Jerry's will is mystery enough for the present. I'll try not to think of this Barbara Winthrop again, except to hope that she will soon be returned to her parents. What a dreadful, dreadful thing to happen to any one!"

"I think we shall be at Clayton soon," Gordon's voice broke through her abstraction. "Better get your things ready."

Bab turned from her thoughts gladly, relieved at the prospect of immediate action. She knew, suddenly, that she was almost painfully excited.

"It won't be long now before I see my inheritance!" she thought.

She felt in her pocket to make sure that the keys were safe.

CHAPTER IX

A PITIFUL APPARITION

"WELL, I must say this place doesn't look like much!"

The observation was Gerry Thompson's. Beside her, Charlie Seymour heartily, though languidly, agreed.

"You're right, it doesn't. I doubt if we can even find a wagon to carry our stuff."

"Leave that to me," said Gordon confidently. "In fact, if I am not very much mistaken, yonder rambling shack once called itself a livery stable. Come on, Charlie, let's investigate."

The shabby, deserted country station was not a cheerful sight. Dust lay thick on the road that ran behind the platform; the sun beat down upon it in a dazzling glare. A few straggling houses were dimly visible through the trees. From what they could see of it, the village of Clayton certainly presented no very alluring prospect to the weary travelers.

Mrs. Fenwick stood primly by herself, smiling her vague, sweet smile. Rosa Lee sat on an overturned suitcase in the midst of her piles of

packages, wearing a look of extreme melancholy. Some one had carelessly sat upon a cake!

In vain Bab protested that there were enough goodies left anyway: that the cake, though badly squashed, was still edible. Poor Rosa Lee was inconsolable.

"No, sir, I's nebber gwine make anudder cake like dat," she sighed. "De time Ah spent on dat po' cake——"

"Love's labor lost!" Gerry murmured, and Bab laughed, to the accompaniment of a shocked, reproachful look from the bereaved cook.

While they waited for the return of Charlie and Gordon, Gerry cast an eye skyward.

"Rain clouds, Bab. Shouldn't wonder if we were in for a pretty storm."

"Oh, I hope not!" exclaimed Bab. "A haunted house must seem ever so much more dismal in the rain!"

Meanwhile, the boys had found that the livery stable, so-called, was really only a tumble-down shed, housing one poor old nag and a wagon with wobbly wheels.

This, they were informed by the owner, was at their disposal, as "far as it went."

"Which won't be far, judging from the look of it," remarked Gerry disparagingly. "I don't see how we are going to squeeze ourselves and all our belongings into that thing."

The owner of the equipage scowled darkly at this reflection on his property.

"I've been servin' the countryfolk for some thirty-odd years, Miss——"

"I can well believe it!" thought Gerry.

"And I've never failed to give satisfaction——"

"Oh, I'm quite sure it will be all right," Bab broke in hastily. "And, if you please, I think we should hurry a little. Those clouds in the east really do look like rain."

"Mr. Wiggley says he will come back and get the luggage after taking us to the house," Gordon explained.

"What! Leave it all alone here on the platform for some one to steal?" cried Gerry.

"There's a boy will watch it, Miss," said Seth Wiggley. He was a thin, bony old man and he chewed his quid of tobacco with an air of great relish. "If anythin' gits so much as teched I'll hold myself pussonally responsible."

A glance from Bab checked Gerry's giggle and spared the old man's feelings.

"It's kind of you to take so much trouble for us," she said gratefully. "Is this—is this—the boy?"

Seth Wiggley nodded a twinkling affirmative as the girls gazed upon a gangling youth with sandy hair, light eyes and a pimply skin.

"He's six feet tall if he's an inch," whispered Gerry to Bab.

In fact, Seth Wiggley's "boy" was one of those youngsters who, at the age of twelve or thirteen, attain the height of twenty. To speak of this long youth as a "boy" seemed absurd; yet a glance at his wide blue eyes and youthful mouth affirmed the statement of Mr. Wiggley that his son was "just turned thirteen."

This person then, known to the irreverent youth of the village as "Wigs," came into the foreground and was properly presented.

The newcomers then climbed into the decrepit vehicle, helping Mrs. Fenwick in first. When Rosa Lee followed it seemed as though the wagon would crack into fragments there in the road. However, it stood the strain, and though it creaked in every joint and axle, started off bravely enough when Seth Wiggley climbed to his seat and cracked the whip over his nag.

"We'll be there soon now, Bab," cried Gerry. "Aren't you thrilled?"

"Who wouldn't be!" retorted Bab, a little breathlessly.

She was looking forward steadily along the road ahead, a dusty ribbon of road winding through a woodland of tender greens and rugged browns. The sweet, pungent scent of pines wafted from the heart of the woods and filled her

with a sudden longing to wander down grassy paths and linger beside the sun-warmed waters of the brook whose sweet, distant music came pleasantly to her ears.

"I feel like a savage," she said whimsically when Gerry rallied her upon her silence. "I'd like nothing better than to be turned loose out there with a bow and arrow——"

"I always said there was something queer about you, Bab Winters. Now I know what it is. Hello! What have we here? What mystery is this?"

The exclamation was caused by a violent disturbance of the bushes at a point in the road just ahead of them. The next moment a small, ragged figure burst from the shelter of the underbrush and ran toward them, arms outstretched, rags fluttering.

"Help me!" burst from the lips of this pitiful apparition. "Help! Help!"

CHAPTER X

THE OLD HOUSE IN THE GLEN

THE old horse, ancient and worn by many cares as he was, shied as the figure in tattered clothes rushed toward them. Seth Wiggley uttered an imprecation and sawed at the reins.

With a cry of pity, Bab Winters rose in her seat. She might have sprung to the road while the wagon was still in motion if Gerry had not caught her.

Before another move could be made, a second figure darted from the woods, seized the terrified child with a firm grip and dragged him back into the shelter of the bushes.

There was a sharp wail of terror, instantly silenced.

With a shout the boys jumped from the back of the wagon. Gordon led the way to the spot where the strange pair had disappeared. Charlie followed.

Bab and Gerry were not slow to follow them. Filled with curiosity, they plunged into the woods, sparing not a thought to their own safety, deaf to the warning cries of Mrs. Fenwick and Rosa

Lee. In their ears was the sound of the boy's cry, his wild appeal for help.

Gordon and Charlie had picked up sticks as they ran. Now they thrashed violently at the bushes, the light of battle in their eyes. Charlie Seymour appeared thoroughly roused from his usual state of lethargy and followed Gordon's lead with enthusiasm.

However, the search proved fruitless. If that sinister figure, darting into the road to seize its victim, had been possessed of magic powers and had disappeared down a hole in the earth, his escape could not have been more completely shrouded in mystery.

There was no sign either of him or the boy; no sign, even, of a struggle in the bushes.

After a few moments more of fruitless effort, the young folks gave up the search and gathered in the road, amazed and shaken by the strange experience.

Bab saw that Mrs. Fenwick was beckoning to them. Rosa Lee was in the act of descending from her seat in the wagon, packages and all.

Bab and Gerry tried to explain to Mrs. Fenwick.

"They have gone—disappeared," said Bab, raising her voice.

"Who have gone?" asked the woman, cupping a hand behind her ear.

"That awful man and the boy," shouted Gerry. "We couldn't find them."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Fenwick. "Well, you had better get into the wagon again, my dears. It is safer than the woods."

The girls exchanged incredulous glances. Their placid chaperon was apparently not interested in the strange occurrence.

"It's the most utterly mysterious thing that ever happened," Bab said as they obediently climbed into the wagon again.

"It is, for a fact," Gordon agreed. "One minute you see them, the next they've vanished into thin air. The whole thing reads like a dream."

"A nightmare, I'd call it," said Bab gravely. "That poor boy! If ever I saw terror on any human face, I tell you it was on his as he ran toward us."

"Ugh! It was horrible," shuddered Gerry. "That arm reaching from the bushes! I expect I'll dream of it to-night."

Seth Wiggley clucked to his horse and they jogged on again down the dusty road.

"The fellow that grabbed the boy had a queer face," Charlie volunteered. "Did any of you notice him?"

"I scarcely saw his face," Bab admitted. "You see, I was looking at the boy."

"The man had a handkerchief wound around his head," Gerry contributed.

Gordon spoke suddenly.

"It was a turban," he said with conviction.

The others looked at him inquiringly.

"You mean you think he was a Hindu or an Arab—some gentleman of that order?" asked Gerry.

Gordon nodded gravely.

"There aren't so many kinds of gentlemen who go around with their heads tied up in handkerchiefs," he reminded her.

"You've been reading too many adventure yarns, old top," said Charlie, once more relapsing into his attitude of boredom. "I thought there was something odd about the fellow, but I didn't take him for a Hindu."

"Dat man sho' had a brack face."

The young folks were surprised by this offering from Rosa Lee and looked at her expectantly.

"An' Ah ought to be a jedge of brack faces," continued the old woman, "seein' Ah done wore one myself ever sence Ah was old enough to set up and take nourishment."

"Oh, Rosa Lee, did you really get a good look at him?" asked Bab eagerly.

"Dat Ah done, honey, sho' 'nough," said the Negress, with unction. "An' dat's why Ah got so all-fired kercited when yo'-all run off into de

woods after dat no-count nigger. Fo' you can take my word fo' it or not, honey, jest as you please, but dat brack man was de debbil's own child."

Gerry giggled nervously.

"Just the same," she said softly, "I have yet to meet my first 'brack man' who wore a turban."

Bab nodded.

"I guess Gordon was right. That poor boy! That poor, ragged, abused child! I shan't sleep much to-night, I can tell you, thinking of him out here in the woods alone with that awful black-skinned savage."

Perhaps it was just as well for Bab that they came in sight of their destination just then.

"This here's the road," said Seth Wiggley, pointing out to them an old wagon road, now almost completely overgrown with weeds and stubbly grass.

"But this road can't be used very much," Gerry protested.

Seth Wiggley gave her an odd look.

"No more it is, Miss," he returned dryly. "Folks they don't come this way 'less they have to."

Gerry looked at Bab significantly and, with her lips, formed the word "ghost!"

Bab nodded.

"This was the main road onct," Seth Wiggley continued. "But that was a long time ago, before

old Jeremiah Dare came home from his travels. Neighborhood used to be called Clayton's Glen."

"It's dreary enough now," remarked Bab.

The trees grew closely along both sides of the disused road. The branches grew low, almost brushing them as they passed.

"A dreary road and a dreary old house," said Seth Wiggley, wagging his head. "And a dreary enough old man who lived there, if you'll excuse my saying that!"

"You don't like the place, do you, Mr. Wiggley?" asked Bab softly.

"Saving your presence, Miss, I do not!" said the old man decidedly. "If you're the Miss Barbara Winters that's been left the house by the old pirate that lived there——"

"He was my great-uncle, Mr. Wiggley," said Bab, with a touch of dignity.

"Your pardon again, Miss," said the old man, turning toward her with an admiring and speculative look. "But maybe you'll excuse an old fellow for saying that if you was my daughter, I'd burn the house down before I'd open the door to a lovely young lady like you!"

As though he suddenly regretted the words—which in truth caused a swift chill to envelop the spirits of the party—he shut his lips tightly on further revelations.

They came suddenly and without warning upon

Bab's property. The old house in the glen was completely hidden by the thick green trees from any one approaching along the road. But here it was as though the woods had been pushed back a little—a very little—and in the heart of this cleared space was the house that had once belonged to Jeremiah Dare and that now was Bab's.

An old brown house, fallen into sad disrepair. Shutters swung loose on their hinges, one of the windows had been broken and boarded up. At the rear was a small building, clinging to the main house like a carbuncle—an architecturally horrible afterthought.

"What's that?" asked Bab, meaning this appendage to her property.

"Was a blacksmith's shop once," explained Mr. Wiggley, pointing with his whip. "But, so fur as I kin find out, it closed when the road did and it ain't been opened since. Ain't much use for a blacksmith's shop here."

Bab could not help wishing that when they had closed the blacksmith's shop they had taken it down altogether. Standing where it did was a blot on the landscape, worse than the old house itself.

Looking at her inheritance, Bab's heart sank.

"A fortune hidden here!" she thought. "Why, Uncle Jerry didn't even have money enough to keep the house in decent repair!"

Two faintly marked wheel tracks that had once probably been a drive led down to the house. Seth Wiggley guided his weary nag along this, then reined in suddenly and sprang, with wiry alacrity, to the ground.

From then on, though the old man was polite enough, helping Mrs. Fenwick and Rosa Lee to alight and assisting with the bundles, Mr. Wiggley delivered himself of no further observations concerning the house. Perhaps he felt too much had been said already.

At any rate, he appeared definitely relieved when the wagon was reversed in the narrow road and he was free to turn his back upon Bab's inheritance.

He clucked to his horse and was starting off when Bab suddenly remembered that they had intended to buy provisions in the village. She ran after the old man to see if his boy would undertake those commissions for her.

Seth Wiggley readily promised, jotting down such things as canned peas, chicken and potatoes, salt and sugar, in a ragged notebook he took from his pocket.

This done, he looked at Bab kindly.

"I'm sorry I said what I did, Miss," he apologized. "You will be doin' an old man a favor if you will jest forgit all about it. Git up, Betsey!"

"Forget all about it," murmured Bab, as she watched Betsey amble off down the road. "As though I could!"

Then, feeling the lucky ring and jingling the keys in her pocket, Bab turned back toward the house.

CHAPTER XI

BAB OPENS A DOOR

BAB WINTERS found the boys and Gerry impatiently awaiting her.

"Haven't lost the keys, have you, Bab?" the latter greeted her.

Wordlessly, Bab revealed the key ring.

"I haven't the least idea which key fits which lock," she said. "I suppose we might as well try the front door first."

They approached the broken front steps slowly. The house, depressed in a glen and hemmed in by trees as it was on all sides but one, seemed oddly aloof from the rest of the world. A feeling of gloom, a strong disinclination to entering that dreary, tumble-down old dwelling, settled upon them depressingly.

Before the porch some rambler roses had been planted. Now the bushes struggled pitifully for existence among a riot of weeds.

"I see where somebody will have to get busy with a garden hat and a trowel," remarked Gerry.

"Don't look at me," returned Gordon. "Be-

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sides, I thought we came out here to use a spade and shovel, not a trowel."

Key ring in hand, Bab went on up the squeaking porch steps and approached the front door.

As she fitted one of the keys in the lock, choosing at random, Gordon was close at her side.

"A great moment, Bab," he said. "Here's luck!"

Bab smiled unsteadily.

The key did not fit and she tried another.

Through her mind ran the words of Seth Wiggle:

"I'd burn the house down before I'd open the door to a lovely young lady like you!"

Another key. Still the lock refused to turn. She tried another—with no better success.

Now there was only one key left on the ring.

An odd, unpleasant fancy came to Bab that the blank windows on either side the obdurate door leered at her mockingly. She drew her gaze away from them with an effort and took up the last key.

"Anyway, it is my house," she said aloud, defiantly.

"Shall I try?" asked Gordon, seeing that her hand was not quite steady.

Bab made a gesture of denial and grasped the last key firmly.

It fitted!

Bab stood very still. The door was about to open. What mystery might it not disclose to them? Was she to know, perhaps, the meaning of that strange codicil to the will of Uncle Jeremiah?

"Bab, be merciful and open that door!"

The whisper came urgently from Gerry Thompson, close at Bab's elbow.

Automatically, Bab obeyed. The key turned harshly, scraping in the rusty lock. The door swung inward, disclosing a cavernous space, filled with shadows.

"The halls of these old houses are always so immense," said Gerry. "Perhaps we should have gone around to the back door."

"Nonsense! Come on!"

With Bab, Gordon pushed through the yawning doorway.

Mrs. Fenwick flitted past them like a prim, silent shadow. Nothing ever seemed to annoy or upset her.

"An excellent chaperon to have," thought Gerry. "One scarcely knows she's about!"

Rosa Lee followed, groaning with the heat and depositing her bundles helter-skelter about the floor at her feet.

"Lawsy, lawsy, Ah declares Ah's plain done up!" she moaned.

She sank down on one of the lower steps of the staircase, raising a cloud of dust.

"De coolness ob dis house am a blessin', sho 'nough. Dat sun am prepostiferous hot."

The laugh that followed this assertion cleared the air for all of them.

"I can see," murmured Gerry, "where Rosa Lee will be a blessing to us in more ways than one!"

The cavernous hall, even the shadows lurking in the corners of it, suddenly lost power to depress them. The young folks raced through it, dropping small bags and bundles as they went, eagerly examining the rooms that lay on either side of the central apartment.

These rooms were not as bare and dreary as the girls had imagined they would be, judging from the exterior of the house.

The two apartments at the front had evidently both been used as sitting rooms in the days of the dwelling's prosperity. They were furnished in an old-fashioned way. The prints and chromos on the wall were atrocious from an artistic viewpoint, but there was an indefinably livable air about both rooms that went far toward reassuring the young folks and reviving their spirits.

"Look here!" said Bab.

She drew back a pair of portières that hid the cozy nook and disclosed a small room, hardly

more than an alcove and raised above the main apartment by one shallow step. Running the entire width of this room, or alcove, was a broad window seat, covered with cushions of faded and dusty chintz. The only other furnishings were a small, round table and a wicker chair.

"What an adorable place!" cried Bab, her eyes shining. "Why, I've always wanted a house with little unexpected cozy corners like this. I love it!"

Gerry regarded Bab's alcove with a delight that matched her own.

In fact, it seemed, as they hurried through the house on a tour of interesting discovery, that the dwelling that they had come to regard as a dreary, even sinister place, was a gold mine of unexpectedness and old-fashioned comfort.

However, they could not spend too much time in exploration. The sky, overcast with clouds that presaged a heavy thunder shower, made the hour seem much later than it actually was. The house was filled with mysterious shadows so that the girls were content to postpone a more thorough examination of Bab's property until the morrow.

"We'll have hours to-morrow," said Bab. "And we'll explore every nook and cranny of the old house——"

"Beginning in the cellar and on upward to the

attic," finished Gerry. "Your house has possibilities, Bab. Just a little sunshine and fresh air and it will be almost habitable."

Rosa Lee had flown, or, rather, sailed magnificently, straight as a homing pigeon, to the kitchen. The girls followed her there, curious to see what tools their cook would have to work with.

One look, and the old colored woman compressed her lips and raised suppliant hands to heaven.

Gerry and Bab were vaguely sympathetic, though they did not guess, as yet, the hardships to which poor Rosa Lee was to be subjected during the progress of their "treasure hunt."

In the first place, there was an old-fashioned oil stove. Rosa Lee, for all her poverty, had been accustomed to the luxury of gas.

There was an iron sink, relic of barbarism. And there was no way of drawing water except from a well—they supposed there must be a well, somewhere.

"Ah declares to goodness," said Rosa Lee, "looks like yo'-all was gwine live on canned goods fo' de next few days, leastways till dis sink and stove strikes up a speakin' acquaintance wiv dis ole woman. Jest now Ah's pretty skittish and Ah don't mind tellin' de world Ah is!"

"Never mind, Rosa Lee," consoled Bab.

"While the doughnuts hold out to burn, we don't care whether the old stove does or not."

"Dat may be a refrection on mah doughnuts, Ah don't know!" grumbled the old woman, as she laid aside her hat and began to undo her numerous packages. "But one thing Ah'm certain sure of, Ah ain't nebber burned no doughnuts yet!"

Gordon and Charlie went out in search of the well and a bucket of water for Rosa Lee, while the girls continued their hasty inspection of the house.

On the left of the hall, behind the sitting room, they found a long, low, oak-paneled apartment. The rows of bookshelves that lined three sides of it and were filled with dog-eared, musty-looking books told them that they had stumbled upon the library of Jeremiah Dare.

"Nice place to come when it rains," said Gerry.

"And a fireplace!" said Bab.

She removed a Japanese screen from one end of the room, disclosing a roomy grate. The ashes of the last fire built in it were still scattered over the hearth.

As Bab looked down at this tangible manifestation of the occupancy of the late owner, a curious chill, as much mental, perhaps, as physical, enveloped her from head to foot. So real was the sensation of a cold draught blowing

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across her back that she turned, thinking to discover an open window behind her.

There was no open window. But suddenly Gerry's fingers clutched at her arm. Gerry looked startled, peering at her through the dimness of the old library.

"What on earth, Bab," she cried, "is that?"

Already startled and unnerved, Gerry Thompson's whispered sentence set Bab aquiver from head to foot.

CHAPTER XII

PATTERING FEET

FOR a moment there was tense stillness in the room. Once more Bab felt as though an icy wind enveloped her. She was about to move, desperately intent upon breaking the spell that bound her, when the pressure of Gerry's fingers and a "For goodness' sake be quiet, Bab!" halted her.

Then she heard it—the smallest of sounds, eerie and faint, yet alarmingly distinct in the stillness of the room. The soft patter of tiny, scurrying feet back of them.

They turned swiftly and, with frightened eyes, tried to pierce the corners of the room where the shadows lay thickest.

No sight of anything, no sound, no movement!

If they had not both heard it, if their senses had not combined to assure them that they were awake and in full command of their faculties, they might have supposed they dreamed that sound, so faint, so eerie, so utterly unreal had it seemed to them.

For a moment they stood frozen to the spot,

bound by the nightmare belief that they could not move, no matter how much they tried.

A faint laugh from Gerry floated upon the heavy atmosphere of the room.

"Nerves, Bab, nerves!" she cried. With a little gesture of helplessness, she sank into one of the big arm chairs. "I'd never have thought it of you, let alone me!"

She got to her feet again and stood close to Bab. The latter was still staring into the shadows in the far corner of the room.

"We couldn't have imagined that pattering of feet, could we, Bab?"

"Not unless we are more foolish than we look," said Bab stoutly. "There was certainly something over in that corner of the room!"

"Something we could hear but not see!"

"Oh, gracious!" cried Bab, looking wildly about her. "Why not say it was the ghost and have done with it!"

She paused and regarded Gerry intently for a moment. Then she turned and moved slowly over to the spot from which had come the unmistakable sound of light, pattering footsteps.

This part of the room farthest from the windows held a sort of dim twilight. Bab suddenly stumbled over a footstool that she had not noticed and sprawled, headlong, to the floor.

With a cry, Gerry rushed forward, but as instantly stopped; for, as Bab fell she heard again the pattering of feet, followed by a queer swish, as though some object had hurtled swiftly through the air.

Shocked and breathless as she was, Bab heard that sound, too. Before Gerry could come to her aid she was on her feet again and running away from that dark corner toward the door of the library.

There Gerry overtook her and the two girls clung together for a moment of panic.

"What was it?" breathed Gerry. "It was close to you, Bab. Did you see anything?"

Bab shook her head.

"I was a bit dazed, I think. But I felt—I——"

"Yes!" Gerry prompted eagerly.

Bab paused and made an effort to pull herself together.

"It was like—oh, I know you will think I am silly——"

"I'm worse!" cried Gerry. "Don't weaken, Bab. What did you feel?"

"A draught, a cold breeze. I distinctly felt it blowing on me and—oh, it is silly—the draught smelled funny!"

"Smelled funny!" repeated Gerry, looking as though she thought excitement had really

turned her chum's brain. "Now just what do you mean by that?"

"What I say!" said Bab, gaining firmness in the face of Gerry's incredulity. "It smelled damp and musty like—well—sort of like the way you might imagine a dungeon would smell."

"You don't happen to know by experience the way a dungeon would smell, do you?" asked Gerry, with an irony that failed to bring even a shadow of a smile to Bab's grave face.

"I suppose it isn't strange that things should smell damp and musty in this house that has been closed up so long," she mused. It was as though she were trying to reason away her fears. "Open windows, fresh air and sunshine ought to remedy all that. I should think——"

"But the draught you think you felt," insisted Gerry. "How do you account for that?"

"I'm not trying to account for anything," said Bab. "All I know is that to-morrow we are going to tear this old library apart if we have to and find an answer to the mystery. I believe there must be one. And now, come on, let's see what we can find upstairs."

Bab started for the staircase, but Gerry held back.

"Why not wait for the boys to come?" she said, in an odd tone. "It looks so—dark—up there."

"The darkness is caused by a thunderstorm approaching on horseback," explained Bab, with a faint smile. "There! Do you hear the clatter of the horse's hoofs?"

A faint rumble of thunder came from the distance, reaching them in short, staccato taps, eerie and unreal as everything else in this strange old house in the glen.

Bab was almost out of sight on the staircase. Gerry glanced about her and shivered. The shadows seemed to be closing in, pressing upon her. With a gasp she turned and fled in pursuit of her chum.

She found her around a turn in the staircase, staring through a small window sunk into the outer wall.

To the east great cloud banks rolled up, piling one upon the other, the dark mass shot through with vivid thrusts of lightning. The countryside was bathed in a livid greenish light. The trees near the house began to sway and rustle as the cool breath of the storm wind reached them.

Desolate enough prospect, in all truth. The girls turned from it to the encroaching shadows of the old house almost with a feeling of relief.

They scuttled up the remaining few stairs and reached the upper hall. This was broad and square, almost like a room in itself, and at vari-

ous points about it the girls could discern darker shadows against the grayness that they supposed must be doors to the rooms opening out of it.

Certainly, the examination of these rooms was made in the most cursory manner imaginable. Themselves strung to a high pitch of tension by the events in the library below, the noises of the storm without increasing in violence with every moment, the girls did not linger long among the shadows and mysteries of those upper-floor rooms.

They found that there were five of these and that in all but one—and this was the smallest, a little room set, like an afterthought, at the extreme end of the hall—was a double bed.

Though the rest of the furniture was old-fashioned and leered in ghostly fashion at them through the shadows, it was more than adequate to meet their simple needs.

Gerry had just asked with a rather forced bravado which room they thought had belonged to Uncle Jerry during his last sickness, when a tremendous clap of thunder and a moaning onrush of wind drove the girls out into the hall.

Below they saw a bobbing point of light and a voice called up to them. It was Gordon's voice and Gordon was evidently the bearer of the light as well.

"For Pete's sake, what's keeping you girls?" he cried.

"Have you fallen out of the window?" added Charlie's drawling voice. "Or has the ghost run away with you?"

"Both!" snapped Gerry.

The light below stairs suddenly attracted them with irresistible force. Anything to dispel the horrible gloom.

They stampeded down the stairs. At the bottom Gerry fell against the lightbearer, nearly flooring both him and his light.

"Have a heart, girl!" laughed Gordon. "'Strike if you must this old gray head, but spare the lamp,' she said."

Gerry giggled and would have continued on her way toward the kitchen, from which came a suggestive and wholly irresistible clatter of dishes, if Bab had not intercepted her.

"Gerry," said the latter solemnly, "we must be careful not to say a word about what happened in the library to Rosa Lee. You know how superstitious she is. We would have her catching the next train for home."

Gerry nodded.

"Do you think we ought to tell Mrs. Fenwick?" she asked.

"Not yet," said Bab hastily. "There really isn't anything to tell yet, you know. It's just what we thought we felt or saw——"

"Or *smelled!*" shivered Gerry.

"Anyway, don't let's say anything to any one just yet," finished Bab.

Gordon and Charlie regarded the speaker with interest.

"What's all this, Bab?" demanded the former. "Where is the library and what have I missed?"

"Not much," said Bab—and jumped.

A bell jangled through the house, clanging brazenly above the noise of the storm. The iron knocker on the door added to the din, striking harshly, metal upon metal.

Bab smothered a startled exclamation and sprang toward the door. With a swift motion she flung it wide open and peered out into the storm.

No one was there!

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE DARK

GERRY THOMPSON crowded behind Bab and stared over her shoulder at the wind-swept, empty porch.

Suddenly Bab discovered Seth Wiggley's wagon and the ancient horse, Betsey, standing in the driveway at the side of the house.

She leaned weakly against the door and gave herself up to hysterical mirth.

"It's only poor Mr. Wiggley come back with our things," she gasped.

"Well, I must say he made a lot of noise about it!" Gerry hated to remember just how startled she had been. "What made him leave so quickly and where has he gone?"

"Around to the side porch, probably," said Gordon.

They listened and heard the sound of an opening door and a deep mumble of welcome from Rosa Lee.

"And I guess if he's brought our luggage we'd better get it inside before these rain clouds burst wide open," added Bab.

In contrast to the rest of the house, the kitchen appeared quite homelike. With a sensation of poignant relief, the girls found themselves once more in the prosaic, matter-of-fact company of Rosa Lee.

Mrs. Fenwick was helping in the kitchen, too—at least, she was pretending to help. But Rosa Lee did all the actual work.

Seth Wiggley had brought their trunks and provisions from the village and Gordon had already followed him out to the wagon.

Charlie Seymour stood scowling rather unpleasantly in the doorway.

"What's the matter, Charlie? World treating you rough again—or is it just Gordon?"

Since this flippant remark came from the ever-flippant Gerry, Charlie chose to ignore it. But the frown deepened on his brow and he moved impatiently.

Gordon called from the wagon.

"Lend a hand here, will you, Charlie? What do you think you are—an ornament? Make yourself useful."

Charlie's scowl became black. He hesitated for a moment; then, thrusting his hands into his pockets, sauntered out into the storm.

"For all the world as though he were going to a garden party," chuckled Gerry. "He gives himself the airs of a grand duke."

"I don't see why he came with us," said Bab, throwing herself wearily into a chair. "This isn't the kind of thing he cares for, really. Charlie likes to do two things—dance and dash about in that funny little roadster of his. He'll be bored to death up here."

Gerry gave Bab a wicked glance.

"Not while Bab Winters' sweet smile and sunny curls hold out to wave," she chuckled. "Don't think I'm blind, Bab—nor Charlie, either!"

"Don't be silly!" cried Bab.

Rosa Lee chuckled deep down in her throat.

"Lots o' folks does like yo' curly head and bright eyes, honey," she said. She selected a can of beans from the pile of provisions and opened it with nice precision. "And as fo' dat Charlie boy, likin' you is 'bout de only thing Ah's got to his credit. When it comes to doin' anythin' real useful, dat chile's jest about as much account as a flea in a boiler factory."

"Not half so much, Rosa Lee," said Gerry, with a droll face. "Fleas in a boiler factory would probably hop—and I've yet to see Charlie Seymour do anything half so active!"

A halt was put to this flippant conversation by the arrival of the boys and Mr. Wiggley with the trunks. They had landed all the luggage on the

side porch and now proceeded to drag them into the kitchen.

The last piece had landed with a thump amid various grumbles and complaints from the bearers when those dark, piled-up masses of clouds opened and let fall the rain in a sheeting torrent.

The wind whistled wildly about the house and dashed the rain in torrential gusts through the open door of the kitchen.

Gordon got behind the door and, Charlie helping him, pushed it shut against the gale.

All this time Mr. Wiggley had evidenced a marked uneasiness. He looked over his shoulder restlessly and once he mopped his forehead with a red, polka-dotted handkerchief.

With mumbled thanks he accepted pay for his services and strode swiftly to the door, tugging at it to open it.

"But you are not going back in this storm!" Bab protested. "Wait a little, Mr. Wiggley. Maybe the rain will stop."

"Yo'-all's welcome to a bite wiv us," said Rosa Lee, ever hospitable. "It ain't gwine be much, but, sech as 'tis, we's willin' to share it. Lawsy, listen at dat wind!" A fresh gust had whirled wildly about the house. "You ain't nebber gwine to git home in dat storm."

"Just wait till it lets up," Bab urged again. Seth Wiggley shook his head.

"If I know anything about this country," he said, "this storm won't let up until to-morrow morning at the earliest. It's apt to git worse, 'stead of better."

"Well, we've got plenty of beds upstairs," Gerry suggested lightly. "We could put you up comfortably enough overnight."

The old man appeared unreasonably alarmed at this suggestion. It was as though he feared that some one might lay hands on him and use force to make him accept the unwelcome invitation. He thanked them kindly, but, with frank eagerness to be off, jerked open the door and stepped out upon the porch.

There was relief in the gesture with which he pushed his hat down to his ears and battled his way against wind and rain to the dejected horse and the old wagon.

From the kitchen window those inside watched him head old Betsey into the wind and drive off.

Again Bab was assailed by that unhappy sensation of loneliness and desertion. She had an absurd desire to run after Seth Wiggley and drag him back. He was their one link with tried and trusted and known things.

As she smiled at the fancy, Gerry's voice said in her ear:

"Seemed in a big hurry to be off, didn't he?

One might almost believe that our good friend, Seth, does not like these diggings, Bab Winters."

"It would seem not!" Bab forced a smile, then turned to Rosa Lee and asked what she might do to help.

"I feel as though I wanted to get a spade and dig," she added. "Eating seems such a waste of time."

"Speak for yourself, Bab," retorted Gordon Seymour. "Just now I'd not find a hidden treasure half as nourishing as that can of beans Rosa Lee has on the stove."

"Me, myself," said Bab wistfully, thinking of her grandmother and granddaddy, "I'd take the treasure!"

In spite of everything—or perhaps because of everything!—the meal to which Rosa Lee put them down a few minutes later was a merry one. It was a combination lunch and supper, the old woman explained, and so they must eat enough for two meals. This they undoubtedly did, and by the magic of their ravenous appetites, the tin-can fare was transformed into a feast.

The boys had found the old well, a picturesque affair in a setting of tangled weeds and brambles. Gordon was enthusiastic and eager for the morrow when they could explore the country about the old house.

"We saw the glimmer of water through the trees," he told Bab. "It isn't much more than a brook, I guess; but at that we ought to find a swimming hole and have some fun."

"Perhaps we can catch fish, too," suggested Gerry. "The possibilities of your ancestral estate grow apace, Bab. We'll be finding a terrace next, or a sunken garden. Even if the treasure hunt fails," reaching for a roll, "I can see where our summer isn't entirely wasted."

The gayety lasted throughout the clearing away of the dishes and afterward, when they gathered around the kitchen table and told stories and gayly planned the details of the treasure hunt.

But when the time came at last when they must face the shadows of those upper rooms—well, that was different!

Armed against the darkness with only two dim oil lamps, they must make their preparations for the night. The trunks were opened and bedding enough taken from them to serve their purpose.

Then, the boys carrying the bedding; the girls, the lamps; and Mrs. Fenwick and Rosa Lee, themselves; they ascended to the upper story.

After a great deal of fussing and nervous giggling, getting sheets on backwards and two pillow cases on one pillow, they soon had enough

beds made up to serve them comfortably for the night.

After that hair-raising occurrence in the library, Bab and Gerry were very glad to sleep together.

"We'll take one of the smaller back rooms," Gerry decided. "It has a big bed and, some way, I don't like the large rooms so well."

Rosa Lee declared uncompromisingly for the little room with the single bed.

Mrs. Fenwick appeared to have no qualms about taking one of the large front rooms. The boys took the twin to this, saying that it looked about as comfortable and cozy as a barn.

As if any of those memory-haunted rooms could be cozy!

Bab shivered and wondered again which room had belonged to her Uncle Jeremiah. But even as she wondered, the girl was conscious of a feeling of disloyalty. Poor old Uncle Jerry! Why, he would not hurt her, if he could!

Nevertheless, she was not anxious to recall the queer happenings of the day—not in these surroundings. Seth Wiggley's warning to her, the weird experience in the library, the old countryman's eagerness to get away from the house, even though his escape must be made into the teeth of a storm!

Then came the thought of her grandmother and granddaddy, and once more she was filled

with the fierce determination to conquer the old house. If it held a secret, she would discover it!

But the night was long and storm-ridden, and though Gerry slept steadily and placidly, there were hours when Bab Winters' eyes stared wide and frightened into the dark.

Was she mistaken, or did she hear, once or twice through that darkness, the eerie pattering of feet?

CHAPTER XIV

GORDON'S DISCOVERY

THE sun was streaming radiantly in at Bab Winters' window when she awoke. All her fears of the night before had vanished into a vague and unreal mist.

With a bubbling sense of joy in life and the prospect of adventure, she slipped noiselessly out of bed and went over to the window.

About her spread a gleaming, rain-washed world, trees and shrubs and tangled weeds reflecting back the rays of the sun in myriad dazzling rays of color.

The moist, sweet-scented breath of the wind fanned her cheeks and brought the roses glowing to them.

Things were going to happen to-day, she felt it—wonderful, splendid things!

The first of them was Gordon Seymour. She saw him just below her window. He was clad in khaki breeches and puttees, and a scarlet sweater atop this outfit gave a flare of color that, in some

mysterious way, added to the joy of Barbara's mood.

Eyes dancing, she leaned from the window and called to him softly.

His mood seemed to match her own and he looked up quickly, beckoning to her.

"We've the world to ourselves," he called softly. "I have something to show you."

"Down in a minute!" Bab waved and disappeared.

It was all she could do to keep from singing as she jumped hastily into her clothes—sturdy, low-heeled sport shoes, khaki skirt, white middy and fluffy white sweater. She hesitated a minute and then, as an impish afterthought, added a wide scarlet tie. It gave her a rakish, jaunty look that caused her to chuckle softly under her breath.

"I'm stealing Gerry's thunder," she told her radiant reflection. "She always looks like a naughty little gypsy in red."

One glance at the bed to make sure that Gerry was still asleep, and Bab was out the door and flying lightfootedly down the stairs.

No one heard her, and the next moment she stood poised in the doorway, regarding Gordon with dancing eyes.

The boy came toward her with hands outstretched, unstinted admiration in his eyes. Bab's

bright color became a little brighter and her eyes fell to the gay hue of his sweater.

"You looked so sort of frivolous," she chuckled, "that I thought I'd put on something to match."

"Well, if you knew how *you* look!"

"Oh, it doesn't matter how I look, Don. It's how I feel that counts."

With a little, unrestrained gesture she flung out her arms to the wild beauty of the woodland about them.

"I'm going to make each day tell while we're up here, Gordon. And who knows what day—" She paused on a long-drawn breath and stared straight before her, seeing, not the immediate future, but some inner vision of her own.

The boy, watching her intently, took a step closer.

"You mean—the money, Bab?"

"The will, that queer codicil—the possibility of finding a fortune here in this queer, terrible, old house. Of course I'm thinking of it! How could I think of anything else? How could I?"

Gordon gave the girl a keen look, then drew her hand, big-brother fashion, through his arm. Bab's color was almost too high, he thought, her eyes a trifle too bright.

"You're going to think of something else, just the same—at least until it's time for breakfast,"

he told her as he led her along an almost invisible path up the hillside and into the woods.

"But where are we going?" asked Bab, submitting willingly enough.

It was nice to be alone with the boy next door in that early morning world of sweet scents and rainbow hues. The days of their childhood disputes seemed far in the past. They understood each other so well these days, Bab and the boy next door, that there was seldom need of explanations between them. Their comradeship was a very complete and satisfactory thing.

"I'm taking you to my discovery," said the boy, in answer to her question. "Once you've seen it I'm much mistaken if I ever get you back to the house in time for breakfast."

"Your discovery will have to be pretty wonderful then," Bab warned him. "For I've an earnest appetite!"

Gordon's discovery, when they came to it, proved to be a rather unimpressive body of water. Even at flood times it could not have seemed more than a good-sized creek. Now, in shallow places, the water could not have been more than a few inches deep.

"It broadens out farther down, though," Gordon explained. "And at one place it looked deep enough for a swim."

"Oh, it's nice," said Bab, for the music of the

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water, as it rippled over the stones, was sweet to her ears. "I wish we didn't have to wait."

"What for?" queried Gordon.

"Our swim! Oh, dear!"

Bab Winters sat down disconsolately on an old, moss-covered stump. Her face expressed such utter dismay that Gordon was alarmed.

"Now what is it?" with a glance over his shoulder. "See a wildcat or a bear?"

"No," said Bab mournfully. "But if I had a mirror I'd see an idiot."

"A good looking one, anyway," suggested Gordon.

But Bab refused to be consoled.

"It isn't a joking matter," she assured him reproachfully. "Do you realize that with all this beautiful water and everything, we haven't a bathing suit among us?"

"Speak for yourself, young woman," said Gordon, pegging stones into the water with aggravating unconcern. "Do you think I'd go away to the country for the summer without packing the trusty old suit away somewhere among my belongings? I wouldn't be such a sap!"

"Oh," sighed Bab, addressing a small gray squirrel who peeped at her curiously from about the trunk of a tree, "now I suppose he's calling me names!"

Gordon glanced at her sideways, grinned, re-

lented and flung himself on the ground at her feet.

"You and Gerry can probably get one at the village store——"

"One wouldn't do."

"Two then," he went on, with admirable patience. "They usually have a general store in these little towns where they sell everything from buns to bathing suits."

"They'd surely be too long, or short, or old-fashioned, or something."

"You could probably sew them up," soothed Gordon, with characteristic masculine vagueness. "They'd be better than nothing, anyway."

There was a short silence while Gordon pegged stones and Bab stared contentedly out over the water.

"We'll need some sort of a boat," she said after a while. "Do you suppose we can buy that at the village store too?"

Gordon grinned.

"Shouldn't wonder. But if we can't we'll make something, if it's only a Robinson Crusoe raft," he promised. "With all the good material around here, I'd feel sorry for us if we couldn't knock together something that would float. We'll set Charlie to work," he added, with a chuckle.

It was only when they had started back to the

house that the mysterious events of the day before crowded again into Barbara's mind.

Impulsively she told Gordon about the experience in the library. When she had finished the boy regarded her with mingled amazement and indignation.

"But why didn't you tell us before?" he demanded. "What was the idea of being so secret?"

"Then you think it's really important—about the footsteps?" she asked eagerly.

"Important! I should say so! Provided you are sure you really heard anything," he added dubiously.

"We could hardly be mistaken," Bab was sure about this. "We both heard the same thing."

"Might have been mice or rats."

Bab sniffed.

"I've heard mice and rats before," she said. "If this was a mouse, then I'm a parrot!"

When they reached the house they found it impossible to satisfy Gordon's eager curiosity and go at once to the library.

Gerry and Charlie Seymour, dressed and eager for the day's fun, were just starting in search of them as they came up on the porch. Mrs. Fenwick was fluttering like a distracted hen who has lost two of her chicks and Rosa Lee was grum-

bling in the kitchen because the breakfast was getting cold.

By this time, with Mrs. Fenwick's aid, Rosa Lee had scraped at least a nodding acquaintance with the oil stove; the result being that the bacon and eggs, while not up to her usual standard of perfection, were very savory as well as plentiful.

However, there were at least two in the room who were not sorry when the meal was over, good as it was. They were free at last to escape into the library without rousing the suspicions of the cook.

Bab and Gordon were speedily followed by the others. In the intimacy of the book-lined room, Bab repeated, for Charlie's benefit, the story she had told Gordon earlier that morning.

But Charlie was inclined to hoot.

"Sounds like a lot of buncombe to me," he yawned. "Just a woolly ghost story."

Bab flushed and started to speak, but Gerry stopped her with a quick gesture.

"Keep still!" she cried. "Listen!"

At the moment, so distinct as to defy all skepticism, came the soft rush of something behind them!

CHAPTER XV

THE LUCKY RING DISAPPEARS

WHAT had seemed ghastly the evening before in the shadow-filled library, was quite a different thing now, heard in the presence of them all and with the reassuring sunlight streaming in at the window.

"Now do you think we imagined it?" cried Bab. "You heard it too, Gordon Seymour, you know you did! Oh, look!"

In her eagerness, Bab brushed against a large crayon portrait that hung on the wall. The picture swayed to one side. Back of it Bab saw what appeared to be a crack in the wall.

She felt of this crack and, to her surprise, it instantly disappeared!

"Now what," she demanded, beneath her breath, "does one make of that?"

Gordon pressed closer, examining the wall over her shoulder.

"Want to know what I believe, Bab?" he cried. "I bet there's a panel of some sort in this wall!"

It was open just now a little crack and when you pressed on the spot, the panel closed!"

"But, Gordon," protested Bab, "if you are right, and there really is a panel or door of some sort in the wall, then I'm sure I never so much as pressed against it. It—it closed of itself!"

Gerry gave a little squeak.

"The ghost!" she cried.

"Ghosts!" echoed Charlie.

"Ghosts don't roam at nine o'clock in the morning," added Gerry thoughtfully. "If this were the stroke of midnight now—oh, good gracious, this mystery gets worse and worse every minute! I must solve it or die!"

They searched over every inch of the wall behind the picture, but found nothing. They sat down at last to review events and to try to arrive at some sensible conclusion.

"All we really know," said Bab, "is that something ran across the room and disappeared without going out the door or window."

"Only a ghost could do such things," remarked Gerry. "Must have been the haunt, after all."

"That only goes to back my theory that there must be some sort of opening in the wall," said Gordon, speaking to Bab.

"And whoever, or whatever, passed through the wall shut the panel after him, I suppose,"

said Charlie, with a scornful laugh. "Be yourself, Gord, be yourself!"

"There was something in the room," Bab flashed. "You heard it yourself, Charlie Seymour!"

Charles yawned.

"Probably mice! Must be hundreds of them in an old house like this."

Though this theory failed to convince them, they could find no evidence to contradict it. They prowled about the library for another hour, coming back again and again to the crayon portrait, but could not unearth a single additional clew to the mystery.

"Well," said Gerry at last, "this isn't the only place we can look for your fortune, Bab. Let's try another part of the house."

Thoughtfully, Bab held up the lucky ring, the little grinning Buddha with the jeweled eyes.

"Bring us luck, please," she begged, and added ruefully: "I've a notion we are going to need it!"

After that the girls and boys settled to the work of searching the old house with a seriousness and a steadfastness of purpose that seemed to merit greater rewards than it brought.

After a whole week of concentrated effort, the old house had been turned "inside out" from cobwebbed attic to musty cellar. And all this

energy brought to life nothing but a few mice that scurried away, disconsolate, before the demolition of their haunts.

"There go our library ghosts!" said Gerry on one such occasion. "Oh me, that mystery and romance should be explained by mice!"

Day after day of almost feverish effort failed of result, yet Bab persisted in her dogged search for her hidden inheritance in the old house in the glen.

"I can't give up! I won't give up!" she said, over and over again. "Why, you don't know what this means to me!"

The boys and girls made several trips to the village and came back laden with provisions from the general store and, usually, a pile of letters from the post-office.

The young folks from home wrote frequently, begging for news, "Which we've got everything else but!" said Gerry ruefully. Letters came to Bab from her grandmother and grandfather and, though these letters were always cheerful, Bab read discouragement between the lines.

Sometimes, after a particularly disappointing day, Bab took these letters upstairs with her and sometimes she even wept a little over them.

"By this time I hoped to have good news for them," she told herself, beating her fist into the palm of one small hand. "We haven't found the

money! We may never find it. And if we don't, what will they do?"

These questions etched deep shadows beneath Bab's eyes and worried her friends. They begged her to vary the search with some outdoor fun.

"We have plenty of time to find your fortune, honey," Gerry told her again and again. "It isn't as though every day were so important. Let's take a little time off to wander about in these gorgeous woods."

"We want to fish, Bab. Have a heart!" Charlie put in.

"And there's Lake Tanaka half a mile away going to waste," Gordon would add. "Do be reasonable, Bab, and put off finding your inheritance for a little while."

Bab smiled wistfully.

"I have put off finding it for some time already," she said. "Though I must say it isn't my fault. You go on your picnic. I don't mind looking alone."

"Silly Bab! As if we'd leave you!" cried Gerry. "No, if you must make yourself sick we will stay and get sick with you."

"But you see," Bab would add, frowning thoughtfully, "it really isn't your fortune. I can't expect you to feel the way I do."

There were things happening in the old house too—queer things. Bab alone heard them, for

she often lay awake for long hours after her companions were asleep.

Things disappeared too, mostly food, though now and again the young folks missed something more personal.

"Sometimes," grumbled Gerry when she found that her hairbrush had disappeared from the dresser where she was sure she had left it the night before, "I begin to think there is really something queer about this house. I even begin to suspect that my nerves are not all they should be. If this keeps up I shall probably have to be carried back to Scarsdale on a stretcher—if I live to get back at all!"

At night Bab sometimes heard again the noise of pattering feet. This was too distinct, she knew, to be the product of her imagination, yet how explain the sounds?

There were queer noises below stairs too, and they seemed to come from quite far below—in the cellar probably. Bab had never yet found the courage to investigate.

"Although some night, I will!" she told herself resolutely.

Then, one morning Bab awoke to find that the lucky ring, the little Buddha with the jeweled eyes, was gone!

CHAPTER XVI

GOOD MEDICINE

"BUT, Bab, where can it be?"

Barbara Winters shrugged her shoulders. She looked the picture of discouragement as she sat in one of the roomy leather chairs in the library, staring at the grate.

The boys and Gerry stood or sat about her in a grave, concerned circle, discussing the disappearance of the lucky ring.

"As you know," said Bab dully, "I have never had the ring off my finger since we started from Scarsdale. It was on my finger," her voice sank almost to a whisper, "when I went to bed last night."

"Dead sure of that?" Charlie insisted.

"Dead sure. I," with a faint smile, "asked it for luck just before I turned in."

"Perhaps it slipped off during the night," Gordon suggested. "Have you searched the room?"

"Every square inch of it," Gerry returned, before Bab could reply. "It isn't in our room, Gordon. Me, myself, could swear to that."

"So many other things have disappeared too," added Charlie.

"And now the lucky ring," said Bab wearily. "I don't know how the rest of you feel, but I'm just about ready to go home."

"Not like you, Bab!" said Gordon. Bab, looking up, flushed as she met the grave eyes of the boy. "That sounds like a quitter and the girl next door was never that, even in the old days."

Bab got up abruptly and went over to the window. Gerry followed and flung an arm about her.

"You shan't call my Bab names," she flashed at Gordon. "She isn't a quitter, and you know it."

"Of course I do," returned the boy quietly.

Bab turned about and faced her friends. There were tears in her eyes, but her head was held high.

"Thank you, Don," she said quietly. "I guess I needed that."

Gordon went over to her and took her hand in his.

"What you need is a day in the woods, Bab," he said. "Sunshine and a hike through the woods will sweep away some of the grim and ghostly things we've all been thinking for the past few

days. Will you be a good girl and take Doctor Seymour's medicine?"

Bab wept a few tears against Gordon's woolly sweater while Gordon held her, big-brother fashion, an arm about her shoulders.

"Now see what you've gone and done!" cried Gerry indignantly. "You've made her cry!"

Bab looked up, smiling through her tears.

"I'm all right now. I think I needed some of Doctor Seymour's medicine! Has any one got a h-hanky?"

"There you go!" cried Gerry, as she slipped one of her own handkerchiefs into Bab's hand. "If I said half the things to you that Gordon does you'd never speak to me again."

The boy laughed and ruffled Bab's soft hair.

"Treat 'em rough!" he said. "She's scared of me!"

"You!" cried Bab, and laughed.

Rosa Lee was easily persuaded to pack a lunch for them and the boys and girls set off almost immediately, secretly glad to be rid of the grim old house in the glen if only for a few hours.

As they were leaving by the side door "Wigs" Wiggley drove up with a batch of letters. The girls greeted him eagerly and Gerry sorted the letters, dropping half of them upon the ground as she did so.

"Bab gets three and I've only one." Gerry's

tone was plaintive. "I'd like to know if you call that fair!"

The boys had been remembered to the extent of one or two letters from home. So they said good-by to Wigs, after thanking him, and started to climb from the glen and into the woods, reading as they went.

Rosa Lee called to them from the doorway.

"Mis' Fenwick says yo'-all's to be home befo' dark. If you's not, she's lak' to worry her haid off 'bout you!"

They promised, waved to her gayly and disappeared through the trees.

Gerry and Charlie took the lead. Bab observed with amusement that her chum was setting a stiff pace for the lazy lad.

"She will wake him up if any one can," she observed to Gordon.

"The boy has improved," agreed Charlie's cousin magnanimously. "If the improvement continues, we may yet make a man of Charlie!"

"They have the lunch basket though," added Bab, suddenly remembering. "If we fall too far behind them I guess we don't eat."

"Don't worry, we won't starve," chuckled Gordon. "I've a hook and some string in my pocket. And there should be fish in this creek somewhere."

Bab nodded and opened one of her letters.

As she read, Gordon shortened his step to match hers. She appeared utterly absorbed and finally the boy said:

"Share your news, Bab. Don't be so selfish. Is it from your grandmother?"

Bab shook her head absently.

"You'd never guess. The letter is from the lawyer, Mr. James."

Gordon whistled and looked amused.

"What kind of letter?"

She held it out to him with an odd glance.

"Take it and read it yourself, Don. I'd like your opinion."

Gordon read the missive through, frowning. At the end he whistled again, this time with surprise.

"Great Scott, this is rich, Bab! The old boy wants to buy your house!"

Bab nodded.

"That means something, don't you think?" she asked anxiously.

Gordon considered.

"Why, your inheritance is scarcely the sort of place one would want for a summer home, Bab—especially an old codger like Samuel James. He was your great-uncle's lawyer, wasn't he? Probably quite intimate with the old man for a number of years."

Bab nodded without speaking.

"It's possible, then," said Gordon, reasoning aloud, "that this Samuel James knew, or at least had a shrewd suspicion, that your uncle was a man possessed of a considerable fortune."

Bab nodded again and the boy, smiling, tucked her hand under his arm.

"Hold fast, Bab. I believe we're getting somewhere at last!"

"I know what you believe, and of course it's what I believe too," she cried. "The lawyer thinks as we do that there is money hidden somewhere about the old house and—and he wants to get it!"

"Looks like it," said the boy thoughtfully. "Looks, I should say, very much like it!"

Bab stamped her foot on the ground. Her eyes flashed.

"Then if there really is money hidden about that grim old house—I thought I should love it, but now I hate it—and Uncle Jeremiah liked me enough to want me to have it, why did he make the money so hard to find?"

Gordon shook his head without answering.

"There you have me, Bab," he said, after a moment. "I wish I had known this old uncle of yours. He must have been quite a character."

They strolled on for some time in silence.

The others had definitely left them behind now, but neither Bab nor Gordon appeared to notice.

The day was beautiful, the water rippled lazily, mirroring back the trees that bordered the stream, a soft, warm breeze whispered through the woods, lifting Bab's hair from her cheek and tangling it in lovely confusion about her serious face.

"On a day like this every one should be happy, shouldn't they, Don?" she asked, a bit wistfully.

"Why, yes, Bab," returned the boy. "Everybody should."

"But money makes a big difference with people—I mean when they haven't it," Bab explained a trifle incoherently. But Gordon seemed to understand.

"Yes, I suppose it does," he said.

Bab paused and thoughtfully kicked a stone into the water where it fell with a musical plop. Gordon stopped beside her, hands in pockets.

"I suppose it sounds a bit silly," said Bab. "But do you know what I'd do with that money—if I should be lucky enough to find it?"

"What would you do, Bab?" he asked, and she stole a swift glance at him to see if he were laughing. He was not.

"I'd use it to help people who haven't any," said Bab, stirring the ground about and about with the toe of her shoe. "I'd try to see that everybody I met—who needed help—would be a little happier because I'd come along. You aren't laughing, Gordon?"

"Great Scott, Bab!" cried the boy huskily. "What do you think I am? You good little sport! Say, Bab, I like you for that! I wish I could help."

"You do help," said Bab. "You helped this morning when you called me a quitter——"

"I didn't!"

"Well, you must admit it sounded something like that," she said, with a smile. "But the loss of the lucky ring frightened me. I'm frightened right now! But whatever happens, don't let me give up, Gordon. I've got to find that money!"

She paused and looked up at him, startled.

"Why! what's that?"

CHAPTER XVII

THE HINDU

"THAT" was the sound of sobbing in the woods. It was the soft, heartbroken crying of a child and seemed to come from somewhere quite close to Bab Winters and Gordon Seymour.

The boy and the girl exchanged glances, then joined hands and pressed through the underbrush. As Gordon held back branches that threatened to sweep Bab's pretty head from her shoulders, the sound of weeping was broken by a man's harsh voice.

"You cry, eh? You cry all the time! You not know how to do anything else!"

"I want my mother!" came the child's voice, strangled with sobs. "Oh, take me back to my mother. Please! Please take me back!"

Bab and Gordon had pressed through until they now stood upon the edge of a small cleared space with only a fringe of trees between them and the chief actors in as pathetic a scene as they had ever witnessed.

On the ground crouched a child whose tattered

clothing gave him the appearance of a bundle of old rags. His face was stained with tears and dirt and his hands were raised in frantic entreaty toward a man who stood above him, a man whose dark-skinned, lowering face turned Bab sick with fear and loathing—a man who wore a turban on his head. The Hindu!

With a whispered "Stay here!" to Bab, Gordon plunged through the bushes, disregarding her restraining hand on his arm.

"Gordon, Gordon, wait! He has a dreadful face!"

At Bab's cry and the sound of cracking twigs as Gordon broke through the undergrowth, the Hindu turned, shot a scowling look at the intruders, caught the shrinking child up in his arms, and darted away into the woods.

Gordon followed almost at his heels. But his toe caught in an upflung root and he stumbled, nearly stretching his length upon the ground.

Recovering himself, he found Bab at his elbow.

"Get back!" he cried. "I don't like the look of that beggar!"

But Bab would not get back. All she could think of was that poor desperate child's upturned, pleading face. She picked up a stick from the ground and followed close beside Gordon as he crashed through the brushwood.

But in some mysterious way they had lost the

Hindu. He had disappeared in that brief moment when Gordon had stumbled over the root of the tree as completely, as utterly, as though the earth had opened and swallowed him up.

Gordon's mouth was grim, his fists were clenched as he turned uncertainly to Bab.

"The beggar's gone!" he cried. "How did he disappear like that?"

Bab clung to his arm. She was trembling.

"Gordon, that awful man! Who was he, do you suppose?"

"Rosa Lee's brack man wiv de handkerchief round his haid," retorted Gordon, looking about him all the time, as though he could not believe the fellow was actually gone. "The Hindu we met on the road, with the kid, that first day, Bab."

"The boy doesn't belong to him, Don! Did you hear what he said?"

Gordon nodded.

"Sounds as though the fellow had stolen him from his family!"

"Kidnaped!" Bab murmured, as she followed Gordon in his vain, impatient search of the surrounding woods. "The poor, terrified child! Don, we must rescue him! We must find him some way!"

"Find him!" repeated Gordon and threw out his arms as though to call the trees to witness

his mystification. "I wish you'd tell me how! Probably the fellow practices black magic, took himself off in a puff of smoke, or something of that sort. Those Eastern beggars know how, so they say."

"Well, then, the poor child must have gone up in a puff of smoke too," said Bab, with a puzzled shake of her pretty head. "It's all very terrible and mystifying and I think we ought to tell somebody about it—somebody who could help punish that awful Hindu and rescue the poor boy!"

Gordon agreed with her, and after one more vain search of the woods they turned back again in the direction of the lake which had been their objective. They had not gone far when they found Gerry and Charlie returning to see what had become of them.

There was excitement aplenty when Bab and Gordon related their adventure and many were the conjectures concerning the mysterious Hindu and the child who, they felt sure, did not belong to him.

During the remainder of the day they talked of little else and even the enjoyment of Rosa Lee's excellent lunch and a subsequent dip in the mild water of the lake did not suffice to turn their attention from this new development.

On the way to the house in the glen they fell in with the personage whom they had most

wanted to see. This was the sheriff of Clayton, an old man with grizzled gray hair and shrewd gray eyes. The eyes were twinkling now, imparting a pleasant expression to a countenance habitually grim.

"You're the young folks up to the old Dare house, aren't you?" he demanded without preface.

They admitted that they were and Gordon added eagerly after noting the man's badge:

"If you're the sheriff, you're just the man we want to meet!"

The old man chuckled, or so it seemed to Bab.

"Thought you'd be wantin' to come to the sheriff before long," he said.

"Which statement means more than it says," remarked Gerry, while the others regarded the officer with a sudden, keen interest.

However, when questioned further, the sheriff refused to be more explicit.

"It's my business to ask questions, not answer them," he said gruffly. "When you said," turning to Gordon, "that I was the man you wanted to see, what did you mean by that?"

Gordon explained as quickly as he could, turning to Bab now and then for confirmation.

The twinkle faded from the sheriff's eyes as he listened. His mouth set grimly and the girls saw something inflexible in his half-closed eyes.

"I've been watchin' that dark-skinned beggar for some time back," he said, and added with a more pleasant look: "Seems like I'd about got the goods on him. What you tell me to-day," he added to Bab and Gordon, "ought to help some."

"He is a Hindu, isn't he?" Bab asked.

She thought the sheriff gave her an odd look.

"He's one o' them foreign critters, sure enough, and the sooner we git rid of him the better," he answered grimly. Then he added, with a curious look at them: "You mean to say you don't know who that feller is?"

"Should we?" asked Bab eagerly.

But the sheriff, assuming that his query was answered, would say nothing further on the subject, although the young folks pressed him hard with questions.

However, he walked with them until they came within sight of the glen in which the old house stood. Then he paused and regarded the young people seriously, stroking the grizzled whiskers on his chin.

"There's something mighty queer about that old house," he told them. "I don't mean that I feel like it's haunted, the way folks says around here. That's silly——"

"Not so silly," retorted Gerry, with a shake

of her head. "You should hear what we hear some nights!"

"What you hear, if you hear anything—and I'm not sayin' you don't—is caused by something with flesh and blood in it, and no ghost—you can be sure o' that," returned the sheriff. "But the house ain't any less dangerous on that account, let me tell you."

"You're trying to frighten us, Mr. Sheriff!" said Bab, and was very glad when Gordon slipped his arm reassuringly within hers.

"Not frighten—I'm jest tryin' to warn you," said the officer, less grimly. "I'm not keeping the fact from you that it would take a load off my mind and make my job a sight easier if you were all to pack up and go home."

"Oh, but we can't—not till we've found the money!" cried Bab.

The sheriff glanced at her sharply and Gordon pressed her arm in a gesture of warning.

"Just what is your job, Mr. Sheriff?" Gordon asked in an effort to cover the slip.

"My job is to find that Hindu furriner and run him out of town," said the sheriff, grim-lipped once more. With a wave of his hand, he indicated the grim, weather-beaten old house, now visible, Bab's legacy. "There you are. Good-by," said he, and walked away.

They watched him go; then turned, thoughtful, silent, toward the house.

"The plot thickens," sighed Gerry.

"Like pea soup when it's cold," agreed Gordon.

"Speaking of pea soup," said Charlie prosaically, "I hope Rosa Lee has some for supper—though I prefer mine hot."

As Gerry and Charlie went on, lured by thoughts of Rosa Lee and supper, Bab and Gordon lingered in the sweet-scented dusk of the woods. A bird called sleepily to its mate. In the distance an owl hooted mournfully. Bab sighed and the boy tried to look into her averted face.

"You aren't letting that grim-faced old codger frighten you, are you, Bab?" he asked anxiously. "Probably doesn't know what he's talking about, anyway."

"I'm not frightened," declared Bab. "Only a little sad to-night, Don. And the mystery over all this old house worries me. I wish—oh, I wish I had not lost the lucky ring!"

CHAPTER XVIII

A HIDDEN LETTER

THE very next day Bab Winters made a discovery that went a long way toward solving some of the questions that perplexed her.

The girls and boys had looked the old house over in search of the lucky ring. They had searched the whole day, all of them, even, in some instances, prying up boards in the flooring when they were loose and there was a chance that some small object might have slipped beneath them.

"No use!" said Gerry at last. "Guess we might as well give the ring up as lost, Bab."

They gathered in the library, tired and a little irritable. This looking for a fortune was all very well, but they felt it was time that some signs of the fortune should show up. Their patience was becoming a trifle frayed.

"I suppose so," said Bab wearily. She had been wandering about the room and now paused before the full length portrait of Uncle Jeremiah in his younger days. Curtains of a dark brown,

dull material hung on either side of this portrait and could be drawn completely across it by means of a silk cord with a tassel at its termination.

Thoughtlessly, her mind on the lucky ring, Bab pulled the cord. The curtains did not spread over the picture as she had expected. Instead, there was a sharp, clicking noise, as though a latch had been released. The sound seemed to come from behind the picture.

Bab called breathlessly.

"Some one," she said, "please look behind this picture!"

Gordon was the first to reach it. His exclamation was soft, but of a quality to bring Gerry and Charlie running to him.

"An opening!" he cried. "An opening not much bigger than your arm! Let go the cord, Bab. I'll hold open the door. Come around here, quick!"

Bab released the cord gently, then ran to where the others were crowding close to get a look behind the picture.

"When you pulled the cord, you released a spring of some sort, do you see?" Gordon cried. "There's the hole, Bab, and it looks as if it reached clear through to some enclosure beyond the wall!"

"Put in your hand, Bab Winters, and draw out

your fortune!" cried Gerry dramatically. "Ah, that I have lived to see this moment!"

"Don't be silly!" cried Bab, peering into the hole. "All I see at present is a large amount of nothing at all—— Oh!"

"What is it?" the others cried in an agony of excitement.

"If you don't speak at once, Bab Winters, I'll drop dead at your feet—and then just see how you'll like that!" came from Gerry.

"We'd have a real ghost, then," suggested Charlie.

"Oh, Bab, don't mind him!" Gerry almost groaned. "What—have—you—got?"

For Bab held in her hand a paper, a paper that her fingers had closed upon as they explored the side of that mysterious hole.

"It was in a little cupboard of some sort," she explained, in response to the serious look on Gordon's face. "Gordon, I don't *think* I'm dreaming! There seemed to be shelves, and on one of them I found this!"

"Wait a minute!" Gordon put his hand in the hole and groped about for a moment. "There are shelves, Bab! And, oh, say! Look what I've found!"

He drew forth his hand and extended it palm outward to Bab.

The lucky ring!

Bab gasped and pounced upon it.

"Ye gods!" cried Gerry. "What next?"

"The fortune, of course," said Charlie, trying to seem bored and not succeeding. "Bab will find at least a million now she's got the lucky ring."

Gordon slipped the little grinning Buddha on Bab's finger. Gerry giggled.

"Looks like a wedding!"

"Don't be silly!" Bab retorted. "Gordon," she added, "where did it come from? Who put it there?"

The boy shook his head.

"We can't tell that, Bab. But we will before long! I've a feeling that the mysteries are going to clear up."

"Oh, I have, too," whispered Bab. "I have, too—now that I have the lucky ring!"

"You are going to read the letter, aren't you, Bab? Ye gods! why this delay?" broke in Gerry wildly.

"Help! She's running amuck!" cried Bab, for Gerry, quite without reason, had turned and glared fiercely at her. "Oh, *do* be quiet, Gerry!" Bab added pleadingly, as Gerry started to speak again.

She blew the dust from the letter—it seemed to have lain in its queer hiding place for a con-

siderable time—and opened it while the boys and Gerry gathered about her with flattering attention.

"It's for me," she said in a subdued tone, though her eyes shone and she fingered the lucky ring lovingly. "A shaky handwriting—some one old. It must have been Uncle Jerry!"

"Bab," said Gerry, in a tone of long and patient suffering, "would you like *me* to read it for you?"

"I'd like to see you try!" cried Bab.

Nevertheless she opened the letter, ran her eyes down the first page of straggling, uneven writing, then began to read aloud.

"My Dear Niece, Barbara:

"They say I am a peculiar old man. Undoubtedly I am, since all these years I have led a lonely life. But this bequest is not so much the whim of an eccentric old man, as you have probably thought it——"

At this point Bab paused to glance uneasily about the room. She had for a moment experienced the sensation that Uncle Jeremiah himself was in the room, standing quite close to her, peering, perhaps, over her shoulder.

The intent faces of her companions begged Bab to go on.

"My favorite sister had your name. She was a wonderful woman, and, if she had not died in her youth, everything I own would have gone to her——"

"Sounds like ready money, Bab!" cried Gerry, the irrepressible.

"——would have gone to her." (Bab read on) "As it is, you, who bear her name, and, as I have learned, also bear a strong resemblance to her——"

"She must have been a peach," Gerry interjected.

"——will be my heir." (Bab, bending her fair head over the document was entirely absorbed in its contents.) "If you are like my sister Barbara, brave, resourceful, persistent of purpose——"

"And so you are, Bab!" cried the loyal Gerry.

"——your inheritance will not be inconsiderable."

There was a gasp from them all, but Bab apparently did not hear it. More absorbed than ever, she bent over the paper.

"One who cannot work for a benefit" (she read) "is not worthy of it. I will not help you, except to say this much. When you have found this letter you will be a step nearer to the realization of your hopes."

The others cried out at that in huge excitement. Bab paused and looked steadily for a moment at that mysterious opening in the wall behind the picture of Uncle Jeremiah. The young folks followed her gaze, stared in awed silence. It was almost as if they expected the solution of the mystery to pop out at them from that small orifice.

In a moment Bab continued:

"Good-by, niece Barbara. They say I may not live the night through, and I must hide this while I have the strength. Good luck.

"JEREMIAH DARE."

As Bab came to the signature there was an outbreak of excited exclamations, questions, comments; but an exclamation from Bab brought an abrupt silence.

"That isn't all! Listen!"

Bab continued with the letter.

"Before I go" (she read) "there is one person I feel I must warn you against. He is not one

of our race and so not easily understood by us. He is a Hindu, an old servant that I brought home with me when I returned from my travels and settled down in this old house to spend my declining years. This man I have been obliged to discharge because he became insolent to me, even threatening. He wishes me no good, and this enmity will, in all probability, pass on to my heir. Beware of him! Once more, good-by!"

CHAPTER XIX

A GRIM WARNING

BAB WINTERS' fingers trembled so that she could not fit the letter back into its envelope. Quietly, Gordon took them both from her.

"Steady, Bab!" he said, his eyes exultant. "I believe we're on the track of something real at last!"

Bab glanced at the lucky ring and shook her head.

"The mystery seems to be darker and deeper than ever. Gordon, I don't understand a thing!"

"Except that there really is a fortune hidden somewhere about this old house!" cried Gerry. "Oh, Bab, isn't that something?"

Of course it was, and for some time the young folks entertained no doubt but what they would find Bab's mysterious inheritance at once. But in this they were doomed to disappointment.

They studied the aperture in the wall that had opened, incredibly enough, to the pull of the curtain cord. They decided that there must be a fine wire running through the cord, over the

molding, and down through the wall of the house, connecting, in some way, with a spring that, when touched, released the door to the small opening. That the door could also be closed by a pull of the cord they proved at once and to their complete satisfaction. When the door was closed no sign of any opening whatsoever could be observed in the wall!

"Funny no one thought of pulling that curtain cord," observed Charlie.

"I did, when we were looking before," announced Gerry. The others turned to stare at her reproachfully. "I never thought to look behind the picture, though."

"She never thinks," remarked Charlie. "Now don't glare at me, young woman. It won't do you a bit of good. Come and help me look for another tassel or button, or something that will release another secret door. If we find that I've a notion we'll find this old miser's hidden money, too."

Though they searched all the remainder of the afternoon, buoyed up by excitement and fresh hope, they found no further clew to the hiding place of the eccentric old gentleman's treasure.

When Rosa Lee finally called them to dinner, they went reluctantly, unwilling to give up the hunt long enough to eat.

Gordon and Bab lingered behind the rest.

"Don," said the girl, "do you notice anything odd about this picture?"

"A great many things," laughed Gordon. "What, in particular, do you mean?"

"Well, about the hanging, for instance. You notice it stands out some distance from the wall because it is hung on the end of this rod."

Gordon was watching her intently.

"Yes, I noticed that! What are you getting at, Bab?"

"Do you remember the time we heard the pattering feet and it sounded as if something jumped toward this picture? Then you went to look for whatever it was and—it had disappeared."

"You mean," said the boy, "that whatever we thought we heard might have passed through that hole in the wall?"

Bab nodded, eyes shining.

"But, Bab!" the boy was impressed but unconvinced, "whatever it was went through the hole must have closed the door after it! Because when we went to look——"

"We found a little crack that closed when you pressed against it," cried Bab triumphantly. "And, Gordon, come over here. I want to show you something."

She showed him then on the inside of the little round door what none of the rest of them in their excitement had perceived. There was a

tiny knob, by which that opening might have been closed from the farther side of the wall!

"But, Bab, you've got me dizzy! No human being could go through that hole, and what animal would have the sense to close the door after him! It's—— Why, it's impossible!"

"Of course it is!" agreed Bab. "But there's one thing certain, Don. We've got to find out what's on the other side of that wall!"

While they ate, night closed down upon the old house in the glen and its mysteries, and with night came a blustering storm that played in wind-swept gusts upon the windows and whistled about the house. The boys and girls moved closer together for companionship and the eyes of Rosa Lee moved often toward the black squares of the windows, which alone separated them from the dismal woods which covered the slopes of the glen. Mrs. Fenwick went off upstairs to read.

The young folks were jumpy. The excitement of the afternoon, while it had roused their hopes, had taken toll of their nerves.

They knew now who the Hindu was, that strange dark man with the turbaned head who lived in the woods and seemed able to disappear at a moment's notice. Uncle Jeremiah's warning had done little to reassure them in regard to this discharged servant. They remembered the sheriff's warning too—and shuddered. What

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did the Hindu want and what was he doing with that poor child, whose sorry plight had already enlisted the sympathies of the boys and girls?

Mysteries, nothing but mysteries, and not an answer to one of them!

Bab turned and turned the lucky ring on her finger while Gordon watched her, thinking how pretty she looked in her reverie. She glanced up and found his eyes on hers.

"Gordon," she said softly, "who took my lucky ring?"

Before the boy could answer, a sharp cry from Gerry made them glance in her direction. The girl was on her feet, pointing with shaking finger toward the door. This opened slowly, inch by inch, propelled by some unseen agency.

Who—or what—was behind that door?

CHAPTER XX

THE SAPAJOU

THAT moment was one the girls and boys—and Rosa Lee—would never forget. What held them silent they did not know. Fear of the unknown perhaps, a temporary mental and physical paralysis. At any rate, no one moved, no one spoke, while the space between door and jamb gradually widened.

In a moment there was a rush from the half-open door, so sudden that the watchers were conscious at the time only of a draught of air blowing across the room.

Then Gerry Thompson screamed and pointed to a small, furry thing that clung to the curtain rod above the curtainless window.

"A—a monkey!" she cried hysterically.

Bab laughed; laughed so hard that she cried and choked and had to be patted on the back. She shrugged her would-be helpers off impatiently and pointed to the door.

"Gordon, close it!" she cried. "If you let that

m-monkey get away again, I'll never forgive you!"

"A monkey!" cried Gerry, shaking her fist at the little animal that merely cocked its head on one side and looked at her with grave disapproval. "And th-that's what's been scaring the l-life out of us all this time. Come down here, you little p-pest, and I'll teach you some new tricks!"

For a while they all talked at once while they stood beneath the curtain rod and stared up at the monkey—who was the only calm one of the company!

At last Gordon succeeded in making his voice heard above the din.

"It's a sapajou; comes from South America I think. Uncle John had one for a pet—remember, Charlie?"

"Sure, a cute little creature too," returned Charlie. "Come down here, funny-face, and shake hands!"

As though in answer, the little creature swung itself head downward from the curtain rod and gravely held out its hand.

"Oh, isn't it cute!" cried Bab, as the monkey regained its perch.

"Looks like a cat and acts like a monkey!" chuckled Gerry. "Three guesses as to what is it, anyway?"

"Well, Ah declare to goodness Ah wish Ah knew de answer to dat question!"

This remark came in plaintive tones from the farthest corner of the room. The eager group about the monkey turned to find Rosa Lee crouched behind a chair, holding on to the back of it defensively. The eyes of Bab's old nurse rolled wildly and the hue of her skin had changed from rich chocolate color to a grayish brown.

"'Cause if it's a cat, out Ah comes. But if it's a monkey, here Ah stays for de rest ob de night, and wild horses, dey couldn't drag me out o' here, no *sir*! Ah declares to goodness, it's de old gentleman's ghost, dat's what 'tis!"

The young folks shouted with laughter as they dragged the protesting Rosa Lee from behind her frail bulwark.

"Ghost nothing!" laughed Gordon. "The old gentleman wanted to make monkeys of us all, so he left this one around to show us what we'd look like after a while!"

"Speak for yourself!" sniffed Gerry.

"Cute little beggar," observed Charlie. "See how he watches us!"

As though encouraged by this friendly comment to approach his new acquaintances more closely, the monkey deserted its perch on the curtain rod and jumped to the center of the table, almost upsetting the lamp as it did so.

"De Lord have mercy on mah soul!" squawked Rosa Lee, starting to her feet. "De debbil's in dat animal! Yassir, he's de debbil's own child, dat's what he is!"

Gordon pushed the reluctant old woman back in her chair and tried to reassure her while the others roared with laughter.

"He's no more a ghost than you are, Rosa Lee," said Bab.

"And goodness knows Ah's solid enough," grumbled Rosa Lee, yet continued to regard the sapajou with an eye of strong suspicion and dislike.

"Look! He wants to shake hands," said Gerry, in huge delight. "He's the cutest thing I ever saw. Come here, Jocko!"

But the sapajou cocked its funny little head on one side, scratched himself deliberately behind the ear, and finally sidled over to where Bab regarded him, bright-eyed, from the farther side of the table.

She held out a hand to the monkey, and the little creature grasped it in both of his and swung himself to her shoulder.

"You old darling," she cried, reaching up to rub its furry head. "Where did you come from anyway—and what do you want?"

As though in answer to the latter part of the question, two small, furry arms were wound about

Bab's neck and a bright-eyed face pressed close to hers while into the black beady eyes crept a look of such comical beatitude as was a treat to see.

"Well, if dat's de ole gen'leman's ghost, Ah must say he's a mighty 'fectionate one," remarked Rosa Lee, to the huge delight of her audience. "An' it has mo' sense than most ha'nts does, too, Ah reckon, 'cause it knows its own niece. Git on dere, animal!" with a defensive gesture as the sapajou turned inquisitive eyes in her direction. "Ghost or no ghost, you keeps yo' distance, hear me? 'Less you wants to git hit wiv de rollin' pin, you do!"

"Don't be silly, Rosa Lee," cried Bab, as Gerry giggled delightedly. "This is no more a ghost than you are! I remember now that Grandmother said something about Uncle Jeremiah having a monkey for a pet, a little creature he picked up while he was in South America—Brazil, I think. Anyway, this must be it."

Rosa Lee was relieved, though by no means completely reassured.

"Well, all I has to say 'bout it is it's mighty funny we didn't see nothin' of it befo'!"

"Do you think it has been hiding out around here all this time?" asked Charlie incredulously. "Say, that's a great theory, Bab!"

"Then," cried Gerry excitedly, "maybe it has been our ghost!"

"An' you jest sayin' as dis wasn't de old gen'leman's ghost!" protested Rosa Lee.

No one paid any attention to her, for Gerry's theory was exciting and at the same time, which was much less usual, plausible.

"You mean this little monkey here is responsible for the food and other things that have disappeared—Bab's lucky ring, for instance—and the strange noises we've heard?" demanded Gordon, with an odd look. "The monkey could have stolen the ring from her finger at night," he added.

"Why, of course!" Gerry eagerly expounded her theory. "This little fellow—why, he explains everything, or almost everything!"

"That day in the library," said Bab in a queer tone, "when we were certain we heard pattering feet. That was probably the sapajou then——"

"And he disappeared into the secret opening in the wall!" put in Charlie, who had lost all of his air of nonchalance.

Bab put the sapajou on the table where it looked at her reproachfully, its little head cocked on one side.

"While Uncle Jerry was alive the monkey probably saw him use that secret opening more

than once. It probably learned the secret itself, imitating the old man. They are very intelligent, you know, these sapajous. Then, after Uncle Jerry's death he took to the secret place as a natural refuge."

"Ah reckons he's de feller that has been helpin' hisself to mah pies an' doughnuts," said Rosa Lee. "If you don't watch out, animal, you'll be gittin' de rollin' pin square on de top o' you haid!" She said this with such a menacing gesture that the little creature chattered affrightedly and made, once more, for the safety of the curtain rod.

"Now, listen to me, gang!" Gordon's tone was solemn, drawing their attention from the spectacle of the sapajou and Rosa Lee's wrath.

"We're listening," said Gerry. "Shoot!"

"I believe Bab and Gerry have hit pretty close to the truth. This monkey probably had a hiding place back of that hole. When I stood in front of it—the hole, I mean—I distinctly caught a whiff of damp, musty air, as though it came from some space back of the wall. Now, the question is, just what is back of that library wall."

"The outer wall of the house, of course," scoffed Charlie.

"I don't believe it!" Gordon took him up quickly. "I think that there is a space of some sort beyond that library wall and that if we could

solve that riddle we'd be on the track of the greater mystery—Bab's inheritance."

"The secret chamber!" said Gerry in an awed tone. "Oh, Gordon, what a lamb you are to think of it!"

"Come, be sensible, Gordon," drawled Charlie, with an attempt at recapturing his blasé manner.

"Sensible!" exclaimed Bab. "It's the most sensible thing that's been said for a long time!"

"Of course it is," declared Gerry. "We're almost sure now to find Bab's fortune!"

CHAPTER XXI

A MIDNIGHT VISITOR

THE theory of a secret chamber gave the girls and boys plenty to think about during the next few days. They not only theorized; they worked, and worked hard. Of course, the main scene of their labors was the library. They searched the library wall in the neighborhood of the secret opening with an almost feverish diligence in the hope of finding a spring or button that would release another secret opening—a panel or a door that would lead to the secret chamber. A wonderful phrase, a mystic, challenging phrase! And yet they found—nothing.

When they sounded the wall it seemed to them to have a hollow ring, as though there were space beyond it, but they could not find that space.

They tried to put the sapajou through the secret opening they had found, but the little animal would have none of it. He evidently preferred the society of his new friends.

"You're bad," scolded Bab, scratching the little creature's ear. "Of all the disappointing ani-

mals, you are certainly the worst. Why can't you do what's expected of you, anyway?"

At this the sapajou wound a furry arm about her neck and laid his funny little face against her soft cheek coaxingly.

"You're bad. You're a wheedler," chided Bab. "But I can't help loving you just the same."

"Some monkeys have all the luck," said Charlie.

"Why not you, eh, Charles?" Gerry added wickedly.

Bab chuckled and put the monkey down.

"We'll have to find out what—if anything—is behind this door by some other means," she said, watching Gordon as he felt along the wall for perhaps the hundredth time in search of a possible secret panel.

The boy nodded.

"Probably have to use an ax before we get through," he said. "But we don't want to do that until we have to."

Evening found them still searching the house in the glen and with no better result.

Bab was tired, discouraged, uneasy. The shadows of mystery were gathering more thickly about her. She began to hate the old house that had come to her for an inheritance, to hate and to fear it. Uncle Jeremiah with his mysterious Hindu servant, his sapajou pet, his grim old

house, his legendary hidden fortune, began to seem to her like some grotesque old ogre, laughing at her vain attempts to extricate herself from the net in which she was enmeshed.

Her one comfort was that she still had the lucky ring!

It was later that night—very much later—when everybody had been in bed and, presumably, asleep for several hours, that Bab started up in her bed. She was suddenly and fully wide awake, though what had startled her, she could not tell.

She sat motionless, gripping the coverlet with tense fingers. It came then, what she had been waiting for—an odd, tapping noise, faint but insistent, coming, apparently, from somewhere underground.

Bab's flesh crept. Her scalp tingled and she was sure each separate hair tried to stand on end. The faint, ghostly tapping continued.

How she found the courage to fling back the covers and get out of bed, Bab never afterward could tell. But the fact remains that she did manage to slip her shivering feet into mules and draw a dressing gown about her.

Then she touched Gerry on the shoulder.

"Don't make any noise," she whispered, as the other started up, rubbing sleep-filled eyes. "Th-there's something in the cellar!"

Gerry was instantly wide awake. She listened for a moment, her hand gripping Bab's, to that faint, fear-inspiring tapping. It stopped for a moment, then began again—now very soft—now a little louder——

Gerry slipped out of bed, groped for her robe, drew it about her.

"What s-say, Bab?" she chattered. "Shall we go d-down?"

Bab answered softly in the affirmative, and together the two girls stole downstairs. They clung to each other, horribly afraid, yet ashamed—and too eager and curious—to turn back.

They crept into the blackness of the hall, felt carefully past obstacles in their path. It was pitch black—a blackness thick, tangible. As they descended, the tapping grew steadily louder.

"It's in the cellar!" stammered Gerry. "Oh, Bab, let's go back!"

"We—we can't!" said Bab through chattering teeth. "Sh—don't make a noise!"

On through the blackness of the kitchen, somehow avoiding objects in their path, on to the door that led to the cellar. If they could only have a light—just the least little glimmer of a light!

With her hand on the knob of the door, Bab hesitated. Gerry tried to draw her back. The tapping was louder now. Other noises could be

heard, too—the soft padding of feet, the groping of a hand, perhaps, across a wall. There was a sudden sound, muted, but louder than the others. Some one down there had stubbed his toe—some one had given voice to a muttered cry of pain.

“Anyway,” whispered Gerry hysterically, “it isn’t a ghost!”

Bab agreed that it was not. No ghost had ever been known to stub his toe and gasp about it. It just wasn’t done in the best ghost society! thought Bab a little wildly.

She opened the door a crack, then a little wider crack. Her desire for light was gratified immediately—but this light came from below.

Suddenly impatient, Gerry pushed her chum aside and peered downward. What she and Bab saw in that fantastic moment of revelation was to remain forever branded upon their memory.

The source of the flickering light was a candle. The light illumined the face of a man. It stood out, cameo-like, against the black background of shadows. In the hand of this man was a hammer with which he was tap-tapping against the cellar wall.

But the thing that made the girls catch their breath and shrink back into the sheltering shadows of the kitchen was the identity of this midnight visitor, an identity instantly revealed by the headdress he wore. This was a turban, a turban

that gleamed white above a swarthy, lowering face—the face of the Hindu!

“Hey, what’s the row?”

Gerry screamed and whirled about. Bab leaned, shaking, against the door. It was Gordon Seymour who had cried out. He and Charlie rushed into the kitchen a second later.

“The Hindu! In the cellar! Don’t—*don’t* go down there!” Bab gasped.

But she was too late. Gordon brushed past her, quickly followed by Charlie.

“The light has disappeared!” screamed Gerry. “Oh, boys, be careful!”

The cellar was suddenly in complete darkness.

“Oh, something dreadful will happen!” cried Bab. “Gordon, Charlie, come back!”

All the time she and Gerry were stumbling blindly after the boys, resolved not to leave them to their fate but, as Gerry afterward declaimed, “to die with them if necessary.”

The cellar was in pitch blackness. No—not quite! There was the gleam of light from Gordon’s electric torch. The girls clung together while Gordon flashed the light about the cellar.

“Empty! Empty as a rubbish can on street cleaning day!” muttered Gerry half hysterically.

“But how, why——” cried Bab incoherently. “Where can he have gone?”

“Through this window, probably,” replied

Charlie, beckoning to them. "See, here's one open!"

They examined the window and afterward made a round of the cellar to assure themselves that it was empty. Also, they closed and bolted the open window and saw to it that the others were fastened just as securely.

"Let's get out of here," suggested Gerry, vainly trying to stop the chattering of her teeth. "I—I don't l-like this cellar!"

"Mrs. Fenwick and Rosa Lee are still asleep, thank goodness," said Bab as they again entered the kitchen; but the words had barely left her lips before they were contradicted by Rosa Lee herself.

"Indeed *Ah's* not asleep!" The rich voice came with some asperity from the doorway.

Gordon turned his light in that direction to discover the bulky figure of Rosa Lee, hastily attired in a shapeless dressing gown. Mrs. Fenwick, frightened and still half asleep, just then came up and peered over Rosa Lee's shoulder.

"Have to be daid to sleep through that rumpus!" grumbled Rosa Lee. "What yo'-all doin'? Holdin' a party in de middle of de night?"

Gerry giggled wildly.

"It's a f-funny kind of a party," she cried. "Sort of—unplanned, you might say!"

"Some one was in the cellar, Mrs. Fenwick,"

Bab explained. "It was the Hindu. We could tell by the turban on his head. He—he was tapping at the cellar wall with a hammer."

"Well, Ah declares to goodness!" put in Rosa Lee, hugely disgusted. "Seems like he could do that jes' as well in de mo'nin' and let hones' folks get dere rest—yassir, seems like he picked out a funny time to do dis yere tappin' of hisn. Ah's gwine to bed an' so's yo'-all. Come on—scat! Or would you laks Ah take de kitchen broom to yo'-all young scamps?"

There was no arguing with Rosa Lee in this mood, especially when she was whole-heartedly supported by Mrs. Fenwick, and the boys and girls knew better than to attempt it.

Before they went upstairs again, Bab whispered to Gordon:

"Be sure to lock the kitchen door, Don!"

"It's locked and bolted. Don't worry, Bab," the boy answered reassuringly. "I hardly think we'll have another visitation—not to-night, anyway."

Upstairs in their room, snuggled close together in bed, Bab and Gerry discoursed excitedly upon recent events.

"He was tapping on the cellar wall," said Gerry, in a thrilled tone. "Bab, don't you see what that means? This terrible Hindu servant of the old man is after the fortune, too!"

"It looks that way," Bab agreed. "And that would account for the lights people have seen and for some of the mysterious noises we have heard," she added, tingling. "It would account for—oh, heaps of things!"

"Probably the servant suspected his master had money hidden in the house, even before your uncle died, Bab," Gerry took her up excitedly. "In his letter, you know, he said that the Hindu threatened him and for that reason he had to give him the air——"

"Such slang!" chuckled Bab. "You mean 'discharge him,' I suppose——"

"A rose by any other name——" began Gerry, but Bab interrupted.

"How we must be in that Hindu's way!" she said softly, sitting up in bed. "If he really believes my uncle hid money in this house—and, as his servant, he probably was in a position to suspect, if not to know—then our being here must have spoiled his lovely hope of finding it and making himself rich. Oh, yes, we've bothered him a lot!"

"Not half as much as he's bothered us."

"And he won't stop at anything, probably, to drive us out," Bab continued, without noticing the interruption. "Especially if he has reason to believe that we, too, are on the trail of the hidden fortune."

Gerry sat bolt upright in bed, her eyes wide in the darkness.

"Bab!" she breathed, "what do you mean?"

"I mean," returned Bab earnestly, "that if we are going to find my eccentric uncle's hidden legacy we had better be quick about it. Because, to be perfectly frank, I'm scared to death of what that Hindu may do. He has a—an awful face."

"You put it mildly," returned Gerry, frowning. "I suppose I shall see that Hindu's face in my dreams for the rest of my natural life! Anyway," she added, comfortingly, "you have something the Hindu hasn't, Bab. *You* have the lucky ring."

"Yes," said Bab, smiling oddly in the darkness, "I have the lucky ring!"

"Maybe it really will bring you luck," proceeded Gerry. "Anyway, we can believe it will if we try hard enough."

Morning did nothing to dispel the girls' forebodings. Nor did Rosa Lee's decision, formed overnight, tend to reassure them.

"Ah's had enough ob de goin's on in dis house," declared Rosa Lee darkly. "Ah'm not afraid fo' mah own se'f——"

"Sure of that, Rosa Lee?" teased Gordon, and Bab chuckled.

"But even if Mis' Fenwick don't mind, Ah re-

fuses to share the responsibility fo' a pack o' scatter-brained younguns like yo'-all is——"

"Rosa Lee, you wrong us!" protested Gerry.

"Maybe Ah does and maybe Ah doesn't," returned Rosa Lee, turning her ebony glance upon the frivolous girl. "But howsomever dat may be, Ah's takin' de fust train dat leaves dis place to-morrow mo'nin' fo' Scarsdale. An' Ah's not goin' alone, neider!"

With this ultimatum, she resolutely turned on her broad, flat heel and refused to listen to protest or argument.

"This is the end, I guess, Don. Rosa Lee will take us back if she has to carry us!" Bab said to her old playfellow a little while later. She tried to smile, but tears trembled on her lashes. "She'll take us back in spite of Mrs. Fenwick. Mrs. Fenwick hasn't the backbone of an angle-worm!"

"It should be just the beginning instead of the end," Gordon said, frowning. "Look here, Bab. I may have had my doubts before about something being hidden in this house. But after last night and that Hindu tapping on the wall with his hammer, I haven't a doubt left."

"You mean——" cried Bab.

"I mean that that discharged servant of your uncle's has given us a clew, Bab—a real, red-hot clew at last. I believe there is a cellar behind

that cellar down there, a cleverly concealed store-room where your uncle hid whatever money or valuables he had."

"A subcellar!" breathed Bab. "Oh, Gordon, if that could only be true!"

"It is true, I know it is," insisted the boy with great earnestness.

"Oh, Gordon!" breathed Gerry frivolously, "subcellars don't grow outside of detective and adventure stories, you know they don't."

"Please hush, Gerry," pleaded Bab. "I believe Gordon is right and I want to hear what he has to say."

CHAPTER XXII

BAB LOSES HER INHERITANCE

EVEN while Gordon Seymour enlarged upon his fascinating theory, Bab shook her head unhappily.

"I've thought of that, too, Don," she confessed. "But it would take time to follow up that clew. And we haven't any time! Not that I blame Rosa Lee," she added swiftly, loyally. "She is my old nurse, remember, and is doing exactly what any one of us would do if we were in her place. She doesn't care a rap for Mrs. Fenwick. She smells danger in the air and wants to get us away from it. I don't blame her a bit, but I—I'm horribly disappointed."

They tried appealing to Mrs. Fenwick, but this did little good. The quiet, unassertive woman appeared to have been profoundly shocked by what had happened the night before. She was more than ever like a fussy hen, fearful that one of her chicks would come to harm.

"I'm sorry to have to cut your vacation short, children," she said. "But there is something very

odd about this old house. I don't like it. I feel with good Rosa Lee that the sooner we leave it, the better."

No hope there!

"Never mind, we've got a day left," said Gordon to Bab. "Let's make one more attempt at finding the money."

But Bab shook her head. She was truly discouraged.

While the boys worked down in the cellar feverishly, sounding walls and floor, the girls packed their few belongings. It was an unhappy, rebellious packing, broken by frequent appeals to Rosa Lee. They felt that if they could get the old nurse to relent, Mrs. Fenwick would relent also.

"Can't you change your mind, Rosa Lee?" Bab begged, arms about the old black woman. "Just two days more—one——"

But for once, Rosa Lee was obdurate.

"It's fo' yo' own sake, honey," she replied. "If Ah had mah way we'd be startin' to-day. Now you git along wiv you and finish yo' packin'. You'll be much safer at home dan in dis spooky place."

All the time the girls were up in their room the sapajou sat on the open lid of Bab's trunk and regarded proceedings with black, inquisitive eyes.

"Well," said Bab forlornly, "I'll have one

thing to take back to Grandmother and Granddaddy, sha'n't I, you funny little thing? I'll have the sapajou!"

"He's cute, but a poor substitute for a fortune," sighed Gerry. "Any minute now," she added darkly, "I may go down and wring Rosa Lee's neck. I've felt it coming on all morning."

"Goodness, I'd better lock the door before murder is added to the list of your sins!" laughed Bab.

Rosa Lee's spirits rose in exact proportion to the depression of the girls and boys. Evidently the prospect of immediate flight cheered her mightily. The sound of her singing reached the girls and caused them to frown blackly as, their packing done, they descended to the cellar to overlook the work of the boys. They found the latter hot, dirty, disheveled, and about ready to give up.

"Nothing doing, Bab," Charlie announced reluctantly. "We've been all over this place some twenty times. If there's an entrance to a sub-cellar or an extra room here, we can't find it."

"Not without an ax," Gordon agreed, discouraged at last. "We'd have to rip up the whole place to find anything. And that would mean time, Bab!"

"Just what we ain't got!" cried Gerry. "No

wonder I feel murderous when I think of Rosa Lee and Mrs. Fenwick."

"Can't you make them wait another week, Bab?" Gordon pleaded.

Bab shrugged her shoulders. She was trying desperately to keep back the tears of disappointment.

"You heard what they said. You—you can try your luck, if you like, Don. But—I guess—we go home to-morrow."

It was a dismal gathering at the dinner table that night—all except the sapajou, who swung from the curtain rod and chattered companionably at them. Bab was silent, apathetic. Gordon watched her anxiously, knowing that her thoughts were of her grandparents.

"I suppose I could sell the house to Mr. James—and let him find the fortune, if there is one," thought Bab unhappily. "I might get enough from the sale to help Grandfather and Grandmother a little, anyway. I suppose that is what I'll have to do."

Later that night when they were all in bed, Bab continued her dismal thoughts.

"I can go to work, I suppose," she thought. "But there isn't much a young girl can do and it would break Granddaddy's heart to have me go to work. Granddaddy hoped as much as I from this mysterious legacy of Uncle Jeremiah's, and

now there's n-no hope!" She clenched her hand and felt the lucky ring scrape against her finger.

The lucky ring!

Bab said the words over to herself and began to cry softly, her face smothered in the pillows. After a long, long while she fell asleep.

Hours later she awoke, gasping. A hand clutched her shoulder, shaking her wildly.

"Get up! Get up!" cried a terrified voice out of the darkness. "The house is on fire!"

Bab began to cough, half strangled; sat up in bed; staggered to her feet. There was an acrid smell of smoke in her nostrils. Her throat was full of it. The room was reeking with it.

Dimly she saw other figures; heard sleepy, frightened voices crying out. She stared at the person who had wakened her, who still clung desperately to her arm. Even in that awful moment, Bab had an impulse of sheer wonder as the light of the fire showed her the little scarecrow boy, the mysterious companion of the Hindu!

"How—how did you get here?" she cried.

But the child only clung the tighter to her, moaning his fear.

"Oh, let us get out of here. Don't you see the house is on fire? We'll be burned alive! I—I came to warn you!"

The door of the room burst suddenly open. Rosa Lee and Mrs. Fenwick half fell into the

room, followed by the boys. Gordon slammed the door shut, stood against it, panting, rubbing the smoke from his tortured eyes.

"Bab, are you safe? Oh, Bab——"

"All right, Don, so far!" She came across the smoke-filled room, the frightened child pressed close to her side. "How can we get out? Which way?"

"The stairway's cut off," said Gordon in a queer, grim voice that did not sound like his. "We'll have to get out the window—this window, Bab. It seems the only side of the house that isn't in flames."

Instantly Bab caught the idea. Stumbling, half-blinded, running into Mrs. Fenwick and Gerry and Rosa Lee, who groped about the smoke-filled room, she ran to the bed, stripped the sheets from it. She was tying them together with fingers that trembled when she felt Gordon at her side.

"Atta girl, Bab! Better let me pull them tight, though. I've got more strength, maybe."

Bab relinquished the sheets gladly, for her fingers were all thumbs. Again she put her arm about the little lad who had never left her side and whom Gordon, in his feverish excitement, had not even noticed. There was a terrifying crackling from below. The floor of the room

was becoming unbearably hot. At any moment the flames might break through—envelop them——

Charlie helped Gordon pull the knots tight while Bab found and brought a blanket.

"If the sheets aren't long enough——" she began.

"We can't use that," said Gordon brusquely. "It would slip."

"Got a counterpane?" asked Charlie.

There was one that they had found in the cupboard of the old house. Bab brought it, feeling dizzy, light-headed. She could scarcely find her way. Gerry was at her elbow. A gasping, "Can I help, Bab?" A shake of the head.

Gordon was tying the counterpane to the sheets. Charlie pulled with him, testing it.

"Now, then!" cried Gordon. The improvised rope was ready. "Quick! Help me shove the bed over to the window!"

There was a sharp, rending sound. The fire had burst through the floor at one corner of the room; was running along the boards like a sinuous red snake.

Some one screamed. It was Gerry. Bab caught her by the shoulders, shook her, without knowing what she did.

"We're all right," she said huskily. "Keep your nerve, Gerry! We're all right!"

It took Gordon and Charlie only a moment to fasten the rope to the bedpost while the flame licked along the floor. Without contact with the fire their bodies felt blistered, their tongues were thick. A moment more and the room would be a mass of flames.

"Over with you!" cried Gordon. "Make believe you're monkeys. Slide down that rope!"

"The sapajou," sobbed Bab. "He's lost. He'll be burned to death."

"Out with you!" cried Gordon. "Down that rope!"

Gerry was over the window sill; was sliding downward, gripping desperately with hands and knees. The little lad next—though he fought to be left with Bab. Then Mrs. Fenwick. Then Rosa Lee. They reached the ground, were safe. Bab saw Rosa Lee clasp the child to her capacious breast.

The fire burst with a roar behind them. The heat was intolerable. Their clothes were beginning to smolder.

Charlie made for the window and was drawn back roughly by Gordon.

"Bab first. Quick, Bab!"

Over the window sill into the blessed cool air, skin rubbed from the palms of her hands by the swift slipping downward. Never mind! There was the safe, cool earth beneath her with Rosa

Lee to catch her in a great embrace and pull her away from the burning building.

A crowd of country folk had gathered. The ringing of a bell announced that the rural fire department was at the scene. Bab could see the men hurrying with their buckets—like ants, she thought, and almost as helpless.

Her eyes turned upward toward the window of the room from which she had just escaped. Charlie slipped down the rope, jumped to the ground as she watched.

Gordon, Gordon! One might know he would wait till the last, with the fire roaring behind him, reaching out hungrily for him.

"Gordon!" sobbed Bab. "Oh, Gordon, be quick!"

The boy flung his leg over the sill, grasped the rope and slid down it like a monkey. It was then they saw his coat had begun to burn. They ran to him but, with quick presence of mind, Gordon shrugged out of the smoldering garment and let it fall harmlessly to the ground.

"I'm not very well dressed," he grinned ruefully. "But something tells me that coat won't be of any further use to me!"

"Nothing matters," cried Bab, "as long as we are all safe!"

The fire brigade was really busy now. One whole side of the house was on fire. A ladder

had been propped just beyond reach of the flames and up this swarmed a constant line of men with buckets. Farmers had come from all about to watch the burning of the "haunted house." Satisfied that every living person in the place was safe, they probably felt a certain satisfaction in the conflagration. It appeared certain, at any rate, that the "ghost" would burn with the house, and this was, above all things, a consummation devoutly to be wished.

Some such thought was in Bab's pretty head as she stood with her arm about the little scarecrow lad who had so strangely warned her of the fire and watched her inheritance from Uncle Jeremiah go up in smoke. Perhaps a fortune—that aggravating, elusive, alluring hidden wealth of the old miser—was being consumed with the house. Who knew?

"Well, I guess it just wasn't meant that I was to find that money—not even with the help of the lucky ring!" she said in a husky whisper.

"You poor dear!" said Gerry, putting an arm about Bab. "I forgot how you must be feeling."

Before Bab could reply, the child at her side cried out and clung to her wildly.

"Oh, oh! Don't let him get me!"

Holding the boy close to her, Bab whirled about in time to see the swarthy face of the Hindu peering at them from the shadows beyond the

light thrown by the fire. As Bab flung up her hand in an instinctive gesture of defense, the Hindu sprang toward them, face ugly, hand outstretched to seize the shivering, wretched child.

But as the boy screamed and Bab cried out for help another figure darted from the shelter of the bushes. The Hindu stumbled over an upflung root in the path and sprawled his length on the ground. As he scrambled to his feet a hand was laid upon his shoulder—the stern, firm hand of the law.

"I've got you this time, you rascal," drawled a voice Bab instantly recognized. It belonged to the sheriff of Clayton. "No use to give me your dirty looks," as the prisoner turned eyes of malignant hatred upon him. "Put your hands in front of you—quick!" he ordered, as the Hindu made a stealthy motion toward the broad sash knotted at his belt. "Want I should use you for target practice? No? Good! Now mebbe you'll come along to town quietly with me."

Stunned by the suddenness of this drama, Bab Winters watched mutely while Sheriff Rawson locked a pair of handcuffs about the swarthy wrists of the Hindu.

"Now you've got him, Mr. Sheriff," said Gerry audaciously "may we ask what you are going to do with him?"

"There's a little party in the county jail," said

the sheriff grimly. "This here Hindu, he's been invited!" He gave the scowling prisoner a long, contemptuous look, then turned to Bab.

"You see, Miss, we've been followin' this fellow a right smart while. He looked like he was up to some mischief, but up till to-night we never could get anything definite on him. But just a little while back I was layin' in wait here, having got on his trail at last, when I saw him sneakin' out of your house and I followed him. We'd gone a right smart way when I smelled smoke and saw the sky was red. I guessed it was from here, and hurried to the village to give the alarm. Then I doubled back to see if I could be any help here and found the Hindu at the scene. It puzzled me some, his coming back like that, till I saw what he was after. The kid must have given him the slip some way, and it was the kid he was after."

Every one looked at the ragged, dirty child clinging to Bab. Sheriff Rawson took a step forward and spoke in a gentle tone to the boy.

"Listen, kid. It was this black-skinned beggar that set the house on fire, wasn't it?"

"Yes," said the child. Then, beneath the malignity of the Hindu's gaze, he shrank back against Bab. "Oh, I can't!" he wailed. "He said if I talked he'd kill me!"

"Mighty little killin' he'll do with those

bracelets on his wrist," said the sheriff dryly. "Come, speak up, sonny—you got the whole power of the law behind you."

Then a queer thing happened. At the words of the sheriff the child straightened up. Firmly, but gently, he pushed away Bab's arms. His eyes turned with shrinking and loathing upon the darkly scowling face of the Hindu, wandered to the grim, set face of the sheriff, and rested there. The girls watched him wonderingly.

"Bab, I never was so thrilled in my life!" whispered Gerry. Then the boy spoke in a quick, excited voice, finger pointed at the Hindu.

"Have you really got him safe?"

"Reckon he'd have a good time breakin' away from me, son," said the sheriff reassuringly. "If you've something to tell, fire away."

As the onlookers watched, breathless, the child seemed to grow taller. A queer little figure with a very dirty face in the torn and soiled rags that formed his clothing, he yet had some of the dignity of a finger of fate. His hand, stretched out toward the Hindu, was steady, accusing.

"He is the wickedest man on earth," said the child tensely. "Sometimes he talks to himself, and I have heard him say when he thought I was asleep that he would set the old man's house on fire. To-night when he went out, I followed him. I—I hid in the bushes."

The Hindu took a threatening step forward, but the long fingers of the sheriff held his arm as in a vise.

"Steady, son," he said to the boy. "What then?"

"I saw him go into the house and come out again. I waited until I saw smoke and flames and I knew what he had done!"

"A lie!" snarled the Hindu.

"It was not a lie!" The child turned fiercely upon the prisoner, small fists clenched. "It isn't a lie, either, that you stole me from my people——"

"He what?" asked the sheriff eagerly.

"He stole me from my father and mother." The child began to tremble and tears filled his eyes. "He brought me here to live in a hut and in caves in the woods, and we were always hiding from some one——"

"From me, son!" interrupted the sheriff grimly.

"And because I cried for my mother," sobbed the boy, hiding his face on Bab's shoulder, "he—he beat me."

Bab put her arm about the boy while Gerry showered the sheriff with excited questions. The latter raised a warning hand.

"Just a minute." His voice was brisk, professional. "You say," turning to the child, "that

this scoundrel here stole you. You mean he kidnaped you?"

"From the hotel where I was staying with my m-mother and father," said the child in a muffled voice.

"Where was this hotel?" the sheriff insisted, frowning at the Hindu.

"S-scarsdale," stammered the child.

"Scarsdale!" cried the two girls from that town. Gerry added a little wildly:

"Why—why, that's where we live!"

"Ah recalls there was a kidnapin' in Scarsdale," said Rosa Lee, shuffling forward. "An' if Ah's not mistaken, dere's a reward out for de recovery ob dat chile."

"Of course!" cried Gerry joyfully. "That's the one we read about in the paper!"

Bab's head whirled.

"Wait! Wait a minute!" she cried. "Of course I remember the kidnaping, but in that case the stolen child was a girl—not a boy."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SECRET STAIRWAY

ALL the time the chief actor in this tense drama had been looking from one to the other of the crowd, tear-dimmed eyes studying them wistfully.

Now he spoke with a quiet emphasis that struck home the truth and rendered them speechless.

"I am not a boy," he said simply. "I am a girl. My name is Barbara Winthrop."

It was some time before Barbara Winters could be made to credit the amazing statement of the forlorn-looking child; but when she accepted it at last, there followed the inevitable question, "Why?"

For this the sheriff, now beaming with triumph, had a plausible explanation.

"The picture of this Barbara Winthrop has been in the papers, Miss," he said. "And when she was wearin' her hair and was all washed up, she did, beggin' your pardon, Miss, bear a remarkable resemblance to yourself. I was struck by it that time I met you in the woods."

"And this Hindu—the servant of my great-uncle—kidnaped her!" Bab exclaimed eagerly. "Do you think he meant to kidnap me all the time, and—and simply made a mistake?"

"That's what I think, Miss. And a mighty costly mistake it's apt to be," with a grim look at the Hindu. "He's been prowlin' around that old house in the glen for some time, lookin' for somethin' he must think's hid there. He got wind some way, Miss, of the fact that your uncle had left the place to you, and so he kidnaped you—or the person he thought was you—to git you out of the way, so's he could find whatever 'twas he was lookin' fer."

"And now he'll never find it," said Bab, in an unsteady voice, turning and turning the lucky ring on her finger. "And—neither shall I."

She looked at the dirty girl with the shorn hair and tear-marked face while every one looked at her. Bab suddenly laughed, choked, and went down on her knees beside the poor little ragged figure, clasping it in her arms.

"Oh, Barbara Winthrop, what you have been through for my sake! You even risked your life there in the burning building to warn us of danger! Oh, I'll try to make it all up to you. I'll try!"

The fire was out at last. The house stood, a ghastly skeleton against the faint, gray back-

ground of early dawn, pointing gaunt fingers toward the sky.

Looking at it and the ruin of her hopes, Bab was suddenly flooded with desolation.

"Oh, Granddaddy! Oh, dear Grandmother!" she cried in her heart. "I have done my best and I have failed, failed, failed! How can I go home and tell you so?"

The sheriff took them all, even Mrs. Fenwick and Rosa Lee, to his big house on the outskirts of the town where his wife, a good-natured, motherly woman, took charge of them. They were put to bed immediately and fell into exhausted slumber.

In the morning Mrs. Rawson provided Bab and Gerry and Mrs. Fenwick with articles of clothing borrowed from the wardrobes of her two daughters who were, luckily, about the same age as the girls from Scarsdale.

Gerry Thompson had hard work to suppress her giggles at sight of prim, mouse-colored, unimpressive Mrs. Fenwick attired in the gay, flapperish dress of the younger Miss Rawson; but Rosa Lee was herself in a bright-flowered bungalow apron belonging to the stout wife of the sheriff.

Gordon and Charles had saved their money belts from the conflagration and the boys, clad in

various cast-offs of the sheriff, set out to the village shortly after breakfast to telegraph to their families concerning the catastrophe and ask that more funds be sent immediately.

Sheriff Rawson also sent a telegram, but this was to the half-distracted parents of Barbara Winthrop, telling of the safe recovery of their child. The reward for the capture of the Hindu and the return of the kidnaped girl would naturally come to him, and the family of the sheriff were in a state of incredulity well-seasoned with rapture over this unexpected windfall.

When the boys returned from the village Gordon suggested that they and the two girls visit the scene of the fire.

"Anything will be better than just staying around here, thinking," he urged, when Bab shook her head. "Come along, Bab, we don't want to go home without one more look at the old place."

"I think I hate the place—and I never want to see it again," said Bab, her lips quivering. "I wouldn't go there at all, only there's the poor little sapajou. I thought so much of him, Don. I—I even dreamed of him last night."

Gordon tucked Bab's hand consolingly within his arm.

"Shouldn't wonder if the little beggar was hiding out somewhere about the place," he said. "Won't hurt to take a look-see, anyway."

It was a long walk through the woods to the site of the burned house, but the young folks found the happenings of the preceding night so absorbing a topic of conversation that they reached the scene of the catastrophe almost before they were aware of it.

Bab looked at the charred skeleton with a shudder.

If that old house in the glen had seemed gloomy to them on former occasions, how much more gloomy was it now—a ghastly ruin, the skeleton rooms choked knee-high with sodden débris.

The girls and boys made their way gingerly through the wreckage, wandering from room to room. Although Bab called again and again on the soft little cooing note that the sapajou had come to recognize as her own special summons, there was no rush of tiny feet now, no swift leap to her shoulder, no clinging of furry arms about her neck.

Tears came to Bab's eyes and she wiped them away quickly, hoping no one had noticed the weakness.

Suddenly Gerry gave a little scream. She pointed to what had once been the library, only a few beams left standing, the floor thick with débris.

But what the girls and boys saw was something beyond the ruined library wall—indestructible,

everlasting—a stairway of stone, leading downward!

“Bab! Boys!” cried Gerry. “Do you see what I see?”

They scrambled across the intervening sea of débris, falling over one another, half wild with excitement.

“The stairway! The hidden stairway!” cried Bab. “Get out of my way, Gerry Thompson!” almost fiercely, as her best friend tried to pass before her. “It’s my house! It’s my stairway! I’m going first!”

They half ran, half fell down the slippery steps and found themselves in a damp, dark place, smelling like a dungeon.

“The subcellar!” cried Gordon. “This was what the Hindu was trying to find with his hammer. Anybody got a match?”

Charlie found and produced a precious box of them.

“Let me!” begged Bab. “Let me be the first to make a light!”

“You bet you shall!” cried Gordon, groping for her. “Oh, here you are. Now, then!”

So it was Bab’s hand that first pushed back the shadows of that secret place. The match wavered in her trembling fingers; the flame threw a flickering and uncertain light over the scene.

They could see nothing but the strained, expectant faces of each other.

Bab dropped the match with an impatient exclamation.

"It burned my fingers. We'll have to feel——"

"Wait a minute," said Gordon. "I saw a lamp on this shelf here. Strike another match, will you, Bab?"

They found to their joy that there was oil left in the lamp and enough wick to produce a feeble light. Gordon raised the lamp high above his head, piercing the shadows.

Suddenly Bab gave a wild cry.

"That old chest! Over there in the corner! Oh, Gerry, Gordon, Charlie, can that be the treasure?"

Without waiting for answer, she darted forward, fell to her knees beside an ancient strong box that had been pushed into a far corner of the cavernous place. The others followed, fascinated, breathless.

What were they to see?

Bab tried the lid impatiently, tugging at it with her eager hands.

"It's stuck!" she cried. "Probably locked."

"We'll have to pry it up——" began Gordon, when Gerry interrupted by pushing something into his hand.

"I stumbled over this hatchet just now," she

said. "I guess you can break the lock with that. I almost broke my head."

After a few moments of heartbreaking tension, the lock cracked, then yielded.

"There you go, Bab!" cried Gordon in a voice harsh with excitement. "Up with the lid!"

"Hurry, Bab, hurry!" cried Gerry, half sobbing in her excitement.

"Oh, I daren't!" whispered Bab. "I daren't!"

Slowly—slowly—the lid was pushed back.

Bab looked—gasped—then began to laugh wildly, hysterically.

"Gold!" she babbled. "Gerry, boys, a sea of it! See! I've got my hands in it, almost up to the elbow. It isn't real, is it? I'm dreaming—I——"

The two boys and Gerry flung themselves to their knees beside her, staring down at the contents of that old, battered strong box.

"Bab, Bab!" cried Gordon. "Why, you're rich! There must be hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of gold here!"

"Look!" Gerry pulled out a small compartment and revealed something that shimmered and gleamed entrancingly in the lantern light.

"Jewels!" said Charlie incredulously. "Emeralds, Bab—rubies, diamonds, sapphires——"

"Oh, stop!" cried Bab. "I can't—I can't believe this! It isn't happening to me!"

"Oh, but it is, Bab, it is!" Gordon's fine, young face was alight with a joy and wonder almost as keen as Bab's. "Here is where the old gentleman stored that hoarded wealth of his, here in this old subcellar at the foot of a secret stairway."

"This is what the Hindu was looking for," broke in Charlie Seymour. "It was for this he threatened the old man and had to be discharged from his service!"

"And this," said Gerry dramatically, her hands full of sparkling gems, "is the secret chamber!"

"It's too much," whispered Bab, staring at that gleaming mass of gold. "There *was* a panel, then, in the library wall——"

"So cleverly concealed as to be almost impossible of detection," concluded Gordon.

"And the Hindu, in trying to drive us out of the house so that he could have a clear field for himself, did us the greatest service of all——"

"By showing us the secret stairway," finished Charlie.

"It's rich," said Gordon, bending over the chest. "Rich!"

"And so is Bab!" cried Gerry.

Bab nodded and, reaching into a small compartment, scooped up a handful of shimmering, gleaming gems.

"I want you each to take one," she said, her voice not quite steady, "as a souvenir of this won-

derful time and—and as a pledge of friendship.”

When she put it that way they could not refuse. Gravely, with the air of a ritual, they each chose a glittering jewel, saying, as they did so:

“To our undying friendship, Bab!”

When it was done tears glittered on Bab’s lashes. She raised the lucky ring and looked at it wonderingly—the little grinning Buddha with the glittering, jeweled eyes.

“Thank you,” she said softly. “Oh, Uncle Jerry, thank you!”

CHAPTER XXIV

BAB REGAINS HER INHERITANCE

WHEN the young folks could force themselves to think coherently again, it was decided that the boys should wait beside Bab's miraculously revealed fortune, guarding it there in its hiding place, while the girls went back to the sheriff's house and commandeered a horse and wagon from his farm.

Bab had just turned from her treasure reluctantly and with many a backward glance when there was a quick rush from the shadows behind her. A small, furry animal jumped for the girl's arm, caught it, and swung himself up to her shoulder. The sapajou!

"Oh!" cried Bab, hugging the little creature close enough to have killed a less hardy young sapajou. "Where have you been hiding, you bad little thing? And all the time I thought you were dead!"

"Why, this is his regular hide-out, Bab," said Gerry, as they all crowded about to pet the little creature and make much of it. "I suppose the

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monkey was down here all the time the house burned merrily overhead."

"I suppose this is where you took all the things that disappeared when we first came here," said Bab, frowning at the sapajou, who blinked and chattered in response. "Gerry's hairbrush, for instance."

"We'll look for the hairbrush while you're gone," suggested Charlie, and Gerry threw him a laughing glance.

"I suppose that means you want to get rid of us," she said. "All right, we were going, anyway!"

During the walk back to the Rawsons' home, the sapajou clung to Bab, his funny little face pressed close to her radiant one. Bab never could remember the particulars of that walk, for she was in an ecstatic daze of happiness.

"I can't believe it yet," she said over and over again. "I keep thinking that I'll have to wake up and find it all a dream."

"Want me to prove it isn't a dream?" asked Gerry.

"No, thanks!" Bab dimpled. "You keep your distance, Gerry Thompson, or I'll sic the sapajou on you!"

When they reached the Rawson house they were surprised by the sound of a motor horn

close by. When Gerry would have rushed forward, Bab stopped her with a warning gesture.

"Wait a minute," she cried eagerly. "Those are Barbara Winthrop's parents, I think——"

"Her father and mother come to take her away," breathed Gerry.

"Look!" cried Bab. "There's Barbara on the porch."

But before she had finished the sentence, Barbara was not on the porch. She was flying down the steps toward an automobile from which a man and a woman were hastily descending.

"Mother! Father!" sobbed the girl. "Don't look like that! Don't cry, dearests. I'm all right now, truly I am. Don't cry, Mother!"

But the man and the woman knelt in the dust of the road, their arms about the girl. The woman had flung off her hat and tears were streaming down her face. From where they stood, Bab and Gerry could hear the man's whisper, half-groan, half-prayer:

"God is good!"

Wet-eyed, the girls turned away, but in Bab's full heart was a reverent echo of that cry.

"Oh, God *is* good," she said.

Sheriff Rawson readily agreed to send a wagon and a team of horses to the ruined house for the battered chest containing Bab's fortune.

He stared open-mouthed as the girls gave an excited, incoherent account of their wonderful adventure.

"To think Jeremiah Dare had all that and all the time livin' as if he hadn't one cent to lay atop another! Well, it sure does beat all!" he exclaimed.

Rosa Lee's comment was characteristic.

"Well, all Ah has to say is dat de ole gene'l-man might have left his money in de bank an' saved yo'-all a heap o' trouble gettin' it, honey."

"And done us out of a heap of fun, too, Rosa Lee," cried Gerry, eyes dancing. "Don't forget that part of it!"

"We wouldn't have missed this party for worlds," added Bab.

"Mebbe not," grumbled Rosa Lee, unconvinced. "But it's mah private opinion dat dat ole Jeremiah Dare, he was jest a li'l bit touched in de haid—yassir, dat's mah opinion, an' Ah sticks to it."

"Why, it sounds like a story out of a book," was Mrs. Fenwick's comment. "What a strange miser he must have been! But I am awfully glad you found this wealth, Bab. I trust you will get great comfort out of it—you and your grandparents."

"You girls had better stay here and rest while Mr. Rawson goes for the boys and the strong

box," suggested the sheriff's wife. "You had an exciting night and have been on the go all day. You'll be worn out."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Gerry. "We want to go along! It was hard enough to take our eyes off that chest long enough to come here to ask for the wagon."

"You can go, Miss Gerry," interposed Rosa Lee. "But mah chile is goin' to stay right here 'longside o' me. Dat box'll git here all right widout you."

Bab laughingly agreed to stay with Rosa Lee, and Gerry, saying it would be "no fun" to go without her chum, also remained behind.

The sheriff set out with team and wagon for the ruins of the old house in the glen and returned a short time later with the chest and the boys—the latter sitting triumphantly upon the lid of the strong box.

Bab's fortune was borne ceremoniously into the Rawson living room, to be stared at incredulously by the sheriff and his family.

Gordon went over to Bab, who was petting the sapajou and looking on at the scene with shining eyes, and dumped a pile of articles in her lap.

She cried out in amazement, and Gerry rushed over to her.

"Look!" cried Bab. "Your hairbrush, Gerry!

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'And here's your gold pin, Charlie, that you mourned so——'

"And Gordon's silver pencil—and Charlie's penknife!" came from Gerry.

"Sure, we found the sapajou's cache under a loose brick in the darkest corner of the sub-cellar!" explained Gordon.

"Oh, you wicked little beast!" cried Bab, making believe to cuff the monkey's ear. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

"We found crusts of bread, too," laughed Charlie, "and the remains of one of Rosa Lee's doughnuts."

"Ah said from the beginning dat monkey was de debbil's own chile!" said Rosa Lee, shaking her head. "Yo'-all should 'a' let me take a rollin' pin to him when Ah fust had a mind to—yassir, dat's what you should 'a' done!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE FAIRY GODDAUGHTER

Two days later, having done some very necessary shopping in the village, the girls and boys, Mrs. Fenwick, Rosa Lee, the sapajou and Uncle Jerry's battered chest, said good-by to Clayton and started back to Scarsdale.

The monkey, a collar about his neck, was confined to the baggage car, to the great amusement of the train hands.

The girls and boys were in irrepressible spirits during the long ride home.

"Now that Bab's an honest-to-goodness heiress, I suppose she will shake us poor folk like the dust from her dainty feet," twinkled Gerry.

Bab laughed happily.

"If there's any shaking to be done, you will have to do it all, Gerry," she said. "Oh, isn't it wonderful to be going home like this?"

"A real sensation in Scarsdale," chuckled Gerry. "Beautiful Barbara Winters Heir to Immense Fortune. Old House Burns, Revealing

Hidden Treasure. Can't you just see it? All in headlines, too!"

"And to think," said Bab dreamily, "that our ghosts were only a monkey and a Hindu servant!"

Charlie looked across at Bab, speculation in his eyes.

"What are you going to do with your wealth, lucky girl?" he asked.

"Well," said Bab, groping for the right words, "I promised myself that if we really did find anything in the old house, I'd like to spend some of that hoarded money sort of—well, *doing* things for people. I suppose there are lots of folks," with a sigh born of her new knowledge, "who only need a little money to be happy!"

"Bress yo' heart, honey, so dey is," said Rosa Lee. "Dey's all over de world, folks like dat. You can do a sight o' good wiv yo' money if you likes."

"Yes, indeed," added Mrs. Fenwick. "One of the very finest things about having money is that one may make others happy with it."

"I know that," said Bab, with conviction.

There was no one in particular to meet them at the Scarsdale station, for Bab had urged that their homecoming be a surprise.

Here the young folks said good-by, exchanging

promises to meet the next day for a genuine celebration.

Bab took Mrs. Fenwick home first in the taxi, then Rosa Lee. At last she was alone with the treasure chest and the sapajou. The driver nodded in response to her directions and they sped off toward home—the dear home that now need not be lost.

She had the taxi driver deposit the chest noiselessly on the side porch. She paid him—much to his astonishment, with one of Uncle Jerry's gold pieces! Then, with the sapajou on her arm, entered the house.

Her grandmother and grandfather were in the living room. She heard them talking together.

"Randall was here again," came in Grandmother's tired old voice. "We can't fight any longer, Caleb. We're too old. The house, our dear home, must be sold——"

"And then," cried Bab, a break in her gay voice, "entered the fairy godmother—I should say, goddaughter—with a bag—of gold——"

She ran over to Gran and kissed the old gentleman's ruddy cheek. The sapajou, chattering wildly, sought the shelter of the chandelier.

Then, half-laughing, half-crying, Bab pushed her bewildered grandmother back into the chair from which she had half risen, and flung a handful of gold pieces into her lap.

"You are never to worry any more, never, never, never! You may have a much handsomer house than this, dear grandmother, if you like, for I've found Uncle Jerry's hidden fortune—thousands and thousands of dollars' worth of gold coins and jewels!"

"Hooray!" cried Granddaddy, like the eternal boy he was. "Where is it?"

"On the side porch. Grandmother, stop staring at me so. I'm not crazy—really I'm not!"

They won a coherent account from her after a while, of course, and afterward, three people, one very young, and two quite old, sat until long after dusk talking over their miraculous good fortune and making happy plans for the future.

"Poor Jeremiah," sighed Grandmother once, during the discussion. "What a cramped, lonely life he lived during his last years."

"It does seem as though I might have done something for him—for Uncle Jeremiah who did so much for me," added Bab thoughtfully.

"Don't let any such thought take hold of your mind, Bab," said Granddaddy sternly. "Your great-uncle chose his own way of life. You could have done nothing."

"I'm absolutely happy," sighed Bab, at last. "I think I'm the luckiest girl in the world."

"Why shouldn't you be?" asked Gran, smiling

and stroking the soft, fair curls. "Haven't you got the lucky ring?"

Several years flew by and Bab became a young lady grown. And on this particular night in June Bab was giving a party.

Gerry Thompson was there, of course, for Gerry and Bab were still inseparable. And there was Gordon, just home from a Western university, and Charlie Seymour, not nearly so cocky and conceited as of old.

It was of Charlie that Bab was speaking now. She and Gordon were sitting out a dance on the porch. Through the open door they could watch the happy progress of the party.

"They are all having such a lovely time," said Bab, with the satisfaction of the young hostess whose party is a success.

Gordon chuckled.

"There go Gerry and Cousin Charles out the side door, into the garden, presumably."

"And they will probably come back engaged," laughed Bab. "I've seen it coming on for ages."

"Charlie's not a bad scout these days," said Gordon thoughtfully. "Runs like a streak; made the track team, you know, in good style. The dear old college has made a man of him."

"No," said Bab dreamily. "It's Gerry who has made a man of him. I told you she would,

don't you remember 'way back in that wonderful summer when we found Uncle Jerry's fortune?"

Gordon turned to her with laughing speculation. What he saw was an amazingly pretty girl with fair hair and deep, gray eyes and a complexion that would have put the bloom of a peach to shame. Her hands lay idly in her lap and on the finger of one of them glittered a ring, a tiny, smiling Buddha with jeweled eyes.

Gordon took up the hand and examined the ring.

"It has brought you luck, hasn't it, Bab?"

The girl nodded.

"Everything in the world you wanted?"

"We-ell," said Bab, considering, "*almost* everything."

"I'd offer you me," said the boy humbly, "only that wouldn't be much to offer a girl like you."

"It's all," said Bab softly but very clearly, "that I ever want."

Some time later Bab added:

"Could we go one place, Gordon—on our honeymoon, you know?"

"Anywhere!" returned the boy.

"I've been thinking—you know I've had the old house in the glen rebuilt?"

Gordon nodded, his eyes on her face.

"I'd heard you had."

"It's lovely, Don, painted outside and in, and

a garden about it where there were only weeds before, and some of the woods cleared just a little. And I've even had the old blacksmith's shop restored—only now it's a model kitchen, yellow and white with windows all about it, and two nice yellow cupboards for the pots and pans. It would be such a lovely place for a—a——”

“Honeymoon?” suggested Gordon.

“And we could take Rosa Lee along to cook for us.”

Gordon did not answer at once. He was turning the “lucky ring” around and around on Bab's finger. At last he said, half-laughing, half-serious:

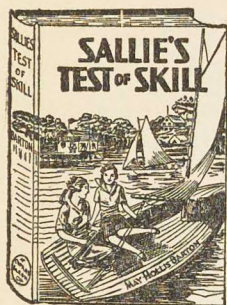
“Don't ever take it off, Bab. For it's brought me luck, too, you know!”

“I'll wear it,” said Bab, regarding the lucky ring solemnly, “I'll wear it as long as I live!”

THE END

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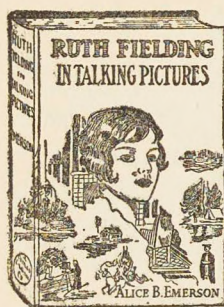
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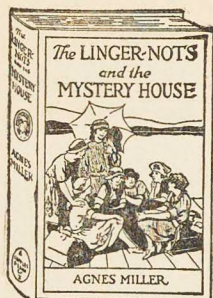
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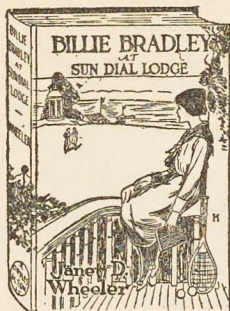
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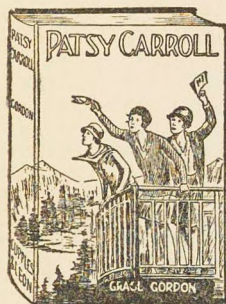
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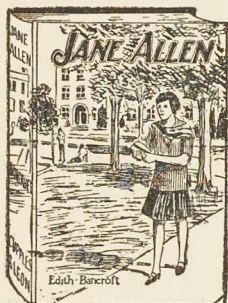
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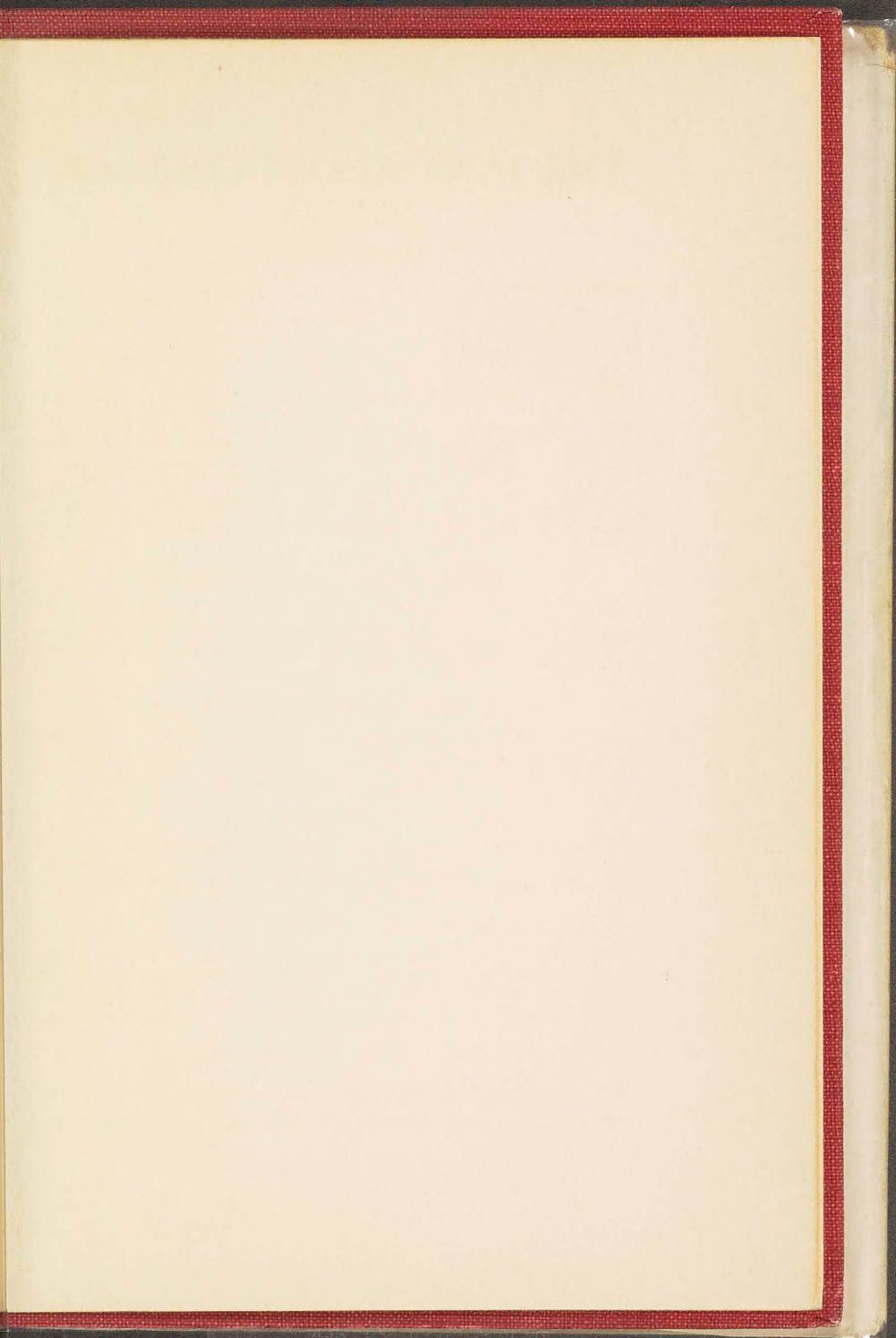
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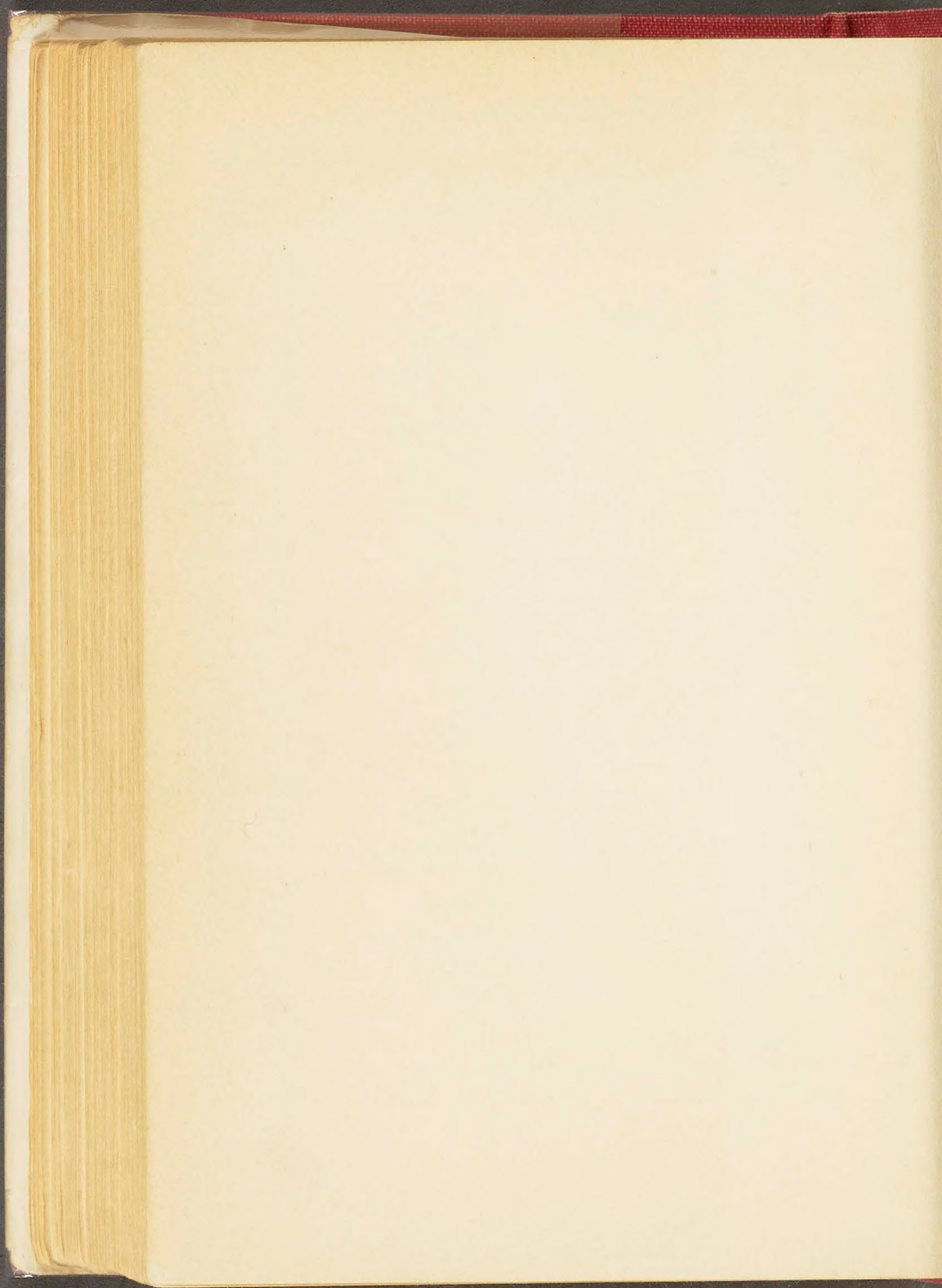
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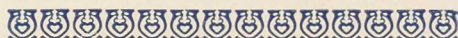
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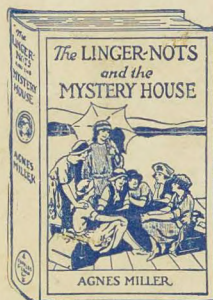
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